The Drop of A Plug

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For Tammy, Calvin, Misty, Casey, and Stacy

Chapter 1

Dr. Yates briskly reviewed his patient's papers, endlessly waiting for when the nurse would return and inform him of the family's wishes for visitation. The room did little to comfort him; even with the daily news silently playing upon the old CRT at the southern corner of the wall. Van Carston was the young man's first comatose patient: Not a big deal to many experienced metropolitan doctors, but an intimidating task for the new doctor nonetheless. His anxiety only grew exponentially upon thinking about how the family was going to react; he wasn't mentally prepared to deal with an inevitable and unfavorable reaction.

His nurse finally arrived, opening the sliding glass door, breaking the beeps and whistles of the life-support machine with a gentle sound of ceramic sliding.

"Doctor." She spoke upon sticking her head into the room. "The family is wondering if the patient is stable enough for them to visit."

Dr. Yates let out a cold and drawn-out sigh, a sigh that made the room evermore aware of the young man's modern stress.

"Yeah, tell them that they must keep it to two visitors at a time for right now." He frantically started whilst flipping the papers on his clipboard to the first page.

"Yes, doctor." Answered the nurse as the sliding glass door sealed itself shut.

Slowly, the beeps and whistles of the life support machine once again dominated the silent room. This was agonizing to Doctor's psyche; he dreaded every crawling second of the exposure. Though the room was quite chilly, a single tiny bead of sweat began to roll down Dr. Yates's forehead as he drastically stood, tapping his right foot on the baby blue tiling below.

Eventually, about two minutes in, he came to terms with the inevitable. He concluded that if he could not handle this, then he could not handle anything. He gawked his mouth open to let out an unrelenting yawn. Afterward, he used both of his hands to pop his neck. *click, click.*

"Let's get this over with." Dr. Yates groaned aloud to himself as he heard two sets of footsteps approaching frantically.

The sliding door opened to reveal two women, one frail and sporting wrinkles of nearly a century and the other appearing to be middle-aged. The latter woman particularly caught his attention; Dr. Yates thought that she was fairly attractive for her age. Upon darting his eyes back to the older lady, he saw an expression of sorrow and fear as she rushed over to the left side of the patient.

"Oh, sweet Jesus in heaven, Van." Her voice was as frail as her figure, dusted and rotting from the ever so persistent shifting sands of time. "Momma Gertrude is here honey."

She shifted her purpled, veiny hands through Van's delicate and soft black hair mixed with grey; stroking it back and forth in a futile attempt to offer some degree of comfort.

"So." The middle-aged woman began. "He's not responding, is he?"

"Rosa, erm, Mrs. Carston." Dr. Yates quickly snapped at his lack of professionalism. "We've tried everything, but we can't get him to respond to anything ranging from sounds, light, and touch."

He paused for a moment and honed into his patient's figure. Much like his wife, Van too was middle-aged. His hair showed a light sense of greying, presumably from the day-to-day stress that came from managing his small-town business. He was

pale as if his skin were virgin to the buzzing rays of the sun. Dr. Yates quickly swallowed a buildup of sticky saliva in preparation to speak.

"It's *very* bad. My colleagues doubt that he will ever wake up." Dr. Yates answered with a tone reminiscent of the grating scratch of sandpaper.

"Oh... Lord... No... " Gertrude quietly sulked as she buried her face in her son's unresponsive shoulder, dampening the fabric upon his hospital gown. She couldn't believe that such a thing was happening to, of all people, her very own son.

Rosa did not respond with any kind of grief or sorrow within that moment. All she could do was focus on her husband's attire. Out of every article of clothing that was stripped away from Van upon entering the ICU, he was still wearing his gold wedding band. Upon viewing this, Rosa raised her left hand; remembering that she chose not to wear it on that day. All she did was blankly stare at her empty ring finger as her mother-in-law knelt beside Van.

"So, what are we going to do about it?" Rosa asked while focusing on a strange birthmark that had plagued her ring finder for as long as she's been alive. For a moment, Dr. Yates was stumped, but he eventually fished an answer from some notes that he had written down upon his clipboard.

"Tonight, after visiting hours, we will be performing a brainwave scan. Within the test, we will be looking for any kind of growth in brain activity." He began. "If we notice this trend, then we'll safely transfer Mr. Carston to Methodist University Hospital down in Memphis."

Rosa, still looking oddly content with herself, quivered her mouth open. No sound emerged for a brief moment, but she eventually spoke up in a voice of weakness.

"And if the results are negative?" It was a question that Dr. Yates dreaded, but most certainly had an answer for: An answer that was the incarnation of common sense, an answer that did not require a glance down at the old and battered clipboard.

"If we notice no change or a decreasing trend in brain activity, then it's best that we leave him here. No other hospital in the country would be able to do anything at that point other than keeping him alive." He started while dreading the dark yet inevitable conclusion to come. "We'll leave it up to the family whether or not he's to be taken off of life-support."

"Oh, God..." Gertrude moaned as her face miraculously sank deeper within her son's lifeless arm.

Dr. Yates wanted to leave, he felt like his dealings with the family were temporarily concluded; the silence of the room further drove him to this conclusion. He stood for a moment with glassy eyes, opting not to focus in on any of the three within the room: Rather, his gaze was fixated on the life support machine itself. *Beep, beep, beep, beep.* After a few moments he slipped away from his hypnotic trance whilst the two visitors appeared to be evermore deep within their own.

"I'll leave you folks alone, please see the receptionist right outside if you need anything." He dryly instructed while backing away; slowly opening the glass sliding door behind him.

"Alright doctor, thank you." Rosa responded, only to be answered by the delicate closure of the door and the swiftly retreating footfalls of the young doctor.

Gertrude's cries finally became audible (albeit quiet and barely noticeable) upon the doctor's absence, that odd sense of comfort was now gone. Rosa slowly paced towards her mother-in-law. She rubbed her arthritis-riddled back and patted her shoulder, causing her to rise from the depths of Van's shoulder. She crossed her right hand to her shoulder to meet the loving embrace that Rosa had to offer. All she needed was some verbal reassurance.

"He'll pull through, he's a strong man with a tough will." Rosa pulled from her mind, the very same mind that endlessly regurgitated similar phrases in an intense fit of heavy denial several hours prior: Denial so heavy that she seemed to see nothing wrong, or that's more or less what her stress-free appearance conveyed.

"Was anybody else hurt in the accident?" Gertrude wondered, strongly ignoring what Rosa had just proclaimed. Rosa shook her head to indeed confirm that nobody else was harmed other than Van.

"I've been telling Jojo for two years now to let off that gas pedal. Now his daddy might die because of it. Oh lord, I hope he's not taking it too hard on himself." Gertrude monologue, expecting no kind of affirmative response.

"If that passenger airbag had deployed then Van wouldn't be in this situation right now." Rosa blankly stated while staring at the white woolen blanket covering up her husband's legs and most of his torso. Gertrude looked up at Rosa's blank expression.

"Whoever's fault it is, there is no amount of blaming in the world that could fix this." She began with her slightly haggish voice.

Filled with emptiness, all Rosa could do was continue sitting in silence all while holding her mother-in-law's hand. Nothing to do, nothing to say. They both suffered the same fate as

Dr. Yates, listening to the beeps and whistles of the life-support machine. It was mentally deteriorating to the point that Rosa began to experience a strange fit of tinnitus, a condition that Gertrude was very accustomed to.

"The temptation is so strong to blame *somebody* for this atrocity, but I know well enough that nothing will change from blame." Gertrude groaned; her throat parched from the lack of fluids within her body. She was in a helpless fit of silent grieving. A million questions raced within her mind, none of which had a clear or satisfactory answer.

Rosa eventually let go of Gertrude's hand and made her way towards a folding chair sitting directly to the right of Van. Upon sitting down on the rough, cold, and metallic chair of low quality, she reached and grabbed her husband's right hand. She awkwardly interlocked fingers with him and began to rub the palm of his hand in a strange, circular motion.

Nearly ten minutes passed by almost as slow as the flow of tree sap mixed into glue, and much like the described fluid, every bit of it was bland and bitter. The dreadful avalanche of tinnitus finally drove Rosa to speak up and break the deafening silence.

"I think Jojo should see him." Rosa gargled before quickly clearing her throat of phlegm.

"But... There can only be two visitors at a time." Gertrude reasoned while looking up, halfway concerned. Her aged face of eighty-one years old was seemingly accusing.

"Yeah, I know." She strained while rising, an annoying pain had recently begun to make itself present within her knees. "Which is why I'll wait in the lobby while Jojo is in here."

She swiftly made her way to the door, dreading the possibility that Gertrude would say something in return, which is exactly what had happened.

"Rosa, dear?" Her old voice echoed amidst the sound of the artificial breathing of the life-support machine.

"Yes, Momma Gertrude?" She answered, not wanting to stay within the room for a second longer. Nevertheless, she turned her body around to face the old lady.

"Are you okay?" Gertrude asked in her aged tone of concern.

Rosa had to stop and think for a moment. Was she doing okay? It didn't run through her mind, not once. Somehow, detaching her consciousness from the violent rapid river of her thoughts felt better. It felt good not to care.

"I think so... Why do you ask?" She answered as best as she could.

"You haven't cried one bit." She reluctantly responded at first, aiming to say something else that wasn't what she was truthfully thinking. "I just don't want you to bottle everything up, it's okay to let it all out. You know that we're all here for each other."

"I'll be alright... And so will Van." Rosa finished before opening the sliding door and leaving Gertrude to grieve in solitude. Gertrude wasn't concerned with her daughter-in-law's current state of mind. She knew that, eventually, she would grieve along with the

rest of the family. She looked back down at Van once again, stroking his soft black-grey hair.

Thirty minutes later, the door once again chimes in its trademark ceramic slide. Gertrude didn't look up; she knew exactly who it was. The figure that walked in was barely a man, for he was barely an adult, existing outside of the womb for only eighteen years and one day. Nevertheless, he could fool the wisest of bartenders as a man in his mid to late twenties.

Paralyzed by witnessing his father within the hospital bed, he could only slowly pace and evaluate his surroundings at a slow and stressful rate.

"Hey, sweetie." Gertrude cheerlessly greeted with her aged voice.

"Hey, grandma." Reluctant at first, the young man finally gathered the courage to have a sound escape from his mouth.

Finally, Gertrude looked up at him, getting prepared to say something: Something that the young man had no will or reason to predict or worry about. A tinge of anger rattled his core at a constant pace following the accident that put his father in the hospital, but it was anger that had little direction. Though the anger had a bordure of self-loathing, there still appeared to be pathways that connected to unknown and hidden figures.

"Jojo." She droned, making direct eye contact with her grandson while still holding her son's hand.

"Yes, grandma?" Jojo answered to his name, slightly exaggerating his tone of questioning.

"I want you to know that *none* of this is your fault. According to the lawmen, you were telling the truth about going the speed limit, and I'm thankful for that." Her aged mind caused her to briefly pause; she had temporarily lost her train of thought. "I just want you to know that this isn't something you should blame on yourself."

"Yeah, whatever. I get it." Jojo drearily coped as his hands retreated to the pockets of his dark blue denim jeans. His eyes were lost upon his father, the blood coursing through the veins in his eyeballs producing the light 'fuzz' that most people associate with stress and dreadful anticipation.

"The doctors are unsure if he'll pull through." That alone was hard to muster up, but it had to be said to Jojo eventually.

"I don't believe it." he blankly responded as his face began to crumble up, contradicting what he had just said.

"I know it's hard to believe, but it's something we'll--"

"No, I *don't* believe it. I refuse." he frantically interrupted, his eyes reflecting the rage of an unknown source. His voice began to rise in frustration.

"Jojo, honey, these--"

"No!" he once again interrupted. "These doctors: They don't know that man. This is the same man that got shot *three times* in the chest during a bar fight! He even knocked out the guy and finished his drink while waiting for the ambulance! If my dad can beat *three* gunshots, then he can survive a tiny little bump on the head."

Gertrude offered no rebuttal, only sitting in the silence, once again on the verge of tears. Jojo couldn't hold it back

anymore, the tears rolled down his cheeks in large clumps of sodium. However, he kept his composure instead of losing control of his breathing, something he was quite good at from when he was a child.

"I'm as scared as you are honey." She began, congratulating herself on the newfound strength to speak once more. "Maybe you *are* right; I hope to God you are. We just won't be sure until we get the results in the morning."

Destined to return: Silence once again befell the room. Rather, it would be silent if it were not for the noisy life-support machine running to keep Van alive. Both parties eventually learned to ignore the sounds of the machine, homing in on the absence of sound that lay past the hums and beeps.

"Sammy was in the lobby." Jojo spoke up after three minutes of 'silence' had passed. Gertrude gazed up at him, confused and astonished.

"Huston?" she asked. Jojo slowly nodded to confirm the surname.

"What in the world is he doing here?" She softly groaned, genuinely confused.

"When mom came down to get me." Jojo started. "He approached us and he... Well, he informed us of the will."

"The *will*?" She nearly gasped, shocked at what she was hearing. "I... Didn't think Van would plan ahead like that. He never spoke *once* about what would happen to the company if he were gone."

"He couldn't tell us much, but apparently I'm supposed to get all of the restaurants while mom gets the three hotels." He

continued, focusing his eyes on the monitor that displayed his father's vitals.

"Well, lord almighty." She wondered to herself. She had never once speculated on who would inherit the company, that was until Jojo brought up his father's attorney, Sam Huston.

"Truth is." Jojo began with a dry throat. "I'm not ready for that yet. I thought I'd have some more time to, you know, do what I wanted to do."

"Well, you don't *have* to take over his business. You could always just let someone else take the reins." She responded.

"I…" Jojo began. "I don't want my father's legacy to just die like that. All the work he put in and all the sacrifices he made. I don't want anybody to just up and erase his history. Y'know?"

He pulled his hand away from his father and crossed his fingers while looking into them, studying the wavy pattern that took form as a means of distraction from the ceaseless world around him. Gertrude noticed this behavior and thought of it as a strange action, yet she only could sit there evermore silently as her grandson was helplessly distracted by his thoughts.

"I don't want to talk about it." Jojo's voice cleared the audible void within the room. Gertrude only nodded; she was immediately aware that her nod of approval fell visually unnoticed.

Finally, Jojo peeled his eyes away and took more notice of his father. It made him think of a pale old prune being poked away at several life-sustaining needles fit with a large breathing mask upon the face's main orifice. He thought that the added synthetic materials upon his father made him look weak and finally defeated. Still, he would hopelessly cling on to the preferable idea that his father would wake up at any moment and swear at the first person

that attempted to lean in for an embrace of relief. That was the only fantasy that he wished would ever come true.

"I like to think that he can hear us." Jojo started, his eyes still glued upon his father's brow. "and, in his mind, he's ripping on everything that we're saying."

He began to chuckle upon what he had just theorized. Gertrude followed even though she wished to remain silent. She figured that if she did not chuckle along, that Jojo would feel displaced from his sanity. The last thing she wanted of her grandson was to make him feel like he was going crazy. She understood though, the time for reminiscence was just around the corner after all.

"Well, I'm sure he can, and I'm sure he is." Gertrude proclaimed upon coming down off of her easily faked and impressionable chuckle backed by several decades of experiences in manufacturing artificial social cues.

Shortly after her response of hope: The gentle and careless voice of a young woman streamed itself upon the hospital's intercoms. Her smooth tone conveyed that of utmost beauty that was entrapped within a prison of brick. Brick that took the form of a building wherein the day-to-day grind of employment could suck the joy out of even the most jovial individual.

"*Attention all visitors and staff: Visiting hours will conclude in five minutes. Repeat: Visiting hours will end in five minutes.*"

Gertrude started to rise as Jojo looked on with hopeless despair; his body remained motionless despite the recent announcement. At this point, she was completely standing up as he only sat within his folding chair.

"I guess we better get going." Gertrude began to stretch; she felt impossibly exhausted.

"I *really* don't want to leave him." Jojo teared up as he remained in his seat; his gleaming eyes pierced through Gertrude's subconscious like a machete striking against rough, thick, and omnipresent foliage.

She let out a repressed sigh of relatability. She hoisted her small black bag from the back of the folding chair and strapped it around her left arm.

"I really don't want to either, but he'll be safe with or without us. We'll be back here to see him first thing in the morning." Gertrude extended out her arm in an offering to help Jojo rise from his seat.

Jojo refused the polite invitation of dragging his grandmother down on the floor with him; he instead opted to rise on his terms.

"All right, let's go." Jojo grunted while standing up; both of his knees popped violently as pestering pain shot up and down his foreleg. This suddenly made him remember how his father would always complain about having bad knees himself.

In typical gentleman fashion: Jojo slid the door open and allowed Gertrude to pass through. They both shot one last look at Van and closed the door behind them, taking their grief with them as if it were a most valuable possession.

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Nine years prior:

Dear Rosa.

I hate to contact you in this way, but it appears that you and the man have changed your phones because the phone number I have here no longer works. It's alright though, it has been several years since we've communicated over the phone anyway so I would not have expected the number to work, especially after the renovations that you and Van had done to y'all's house: I figured that he would be at work (like he always is) so my communication should be secure. It's been a while since we last met up, six years to be precise. Ever Since that night I've been yearning to have you within my bedroom again, and from the eyes that you flashed me the other day in the grocery store, I can only assume you yearn as well, maybe even more so. Given your children's independence and your husband's constant workflow; I offer you a spot by my side once more. Anywhere from ten in the morning spanning until your lovely children return home from school. If you accept my offer, I will once more restore and stimulate your womanhood, no more shall you be deprived of what your husband has failed to provide you with. We can keep this going on for as long as you like, and of course, you have an absolute right to refuse my offer. All I can say is: You won't regret the decision to indulge me. My phone number is on the back of this letter if you wish to contact me. I await your soothing voice, and to feel the back of the silky throat from which it emanates.

Sincerely, Neil Bradford.

It was confusion that first arose upon reading the letter. Confusion in the sense of why the letter even existed in the first place. What an absolutely stupid way to try and lure his wife away. Though he was not home often, anybody could have known better than to send a physical letter to rekindle an adulterous relationship.

He thought of it as a pretty stupid move, even for a carefully calculated man such as Neil Bradford. Van was dumbfounded. Then, his emotions swiftly evolved into a rage. The letter hinted at a period in time where Rosa had indeed engaged in unfaithfulness. He violently gripped the letter causing it to crumble and crease. He slammed it down onto his pristine oakwood desk.

"Rosa!" Van shouted past the open door of his darkened study. "Come here!"

Silence immediately answered him. However, it was quickly vanquished upon the sound of Rosa's house shoes lazily dragging across the hardwood floor. Finally, Rosa leaned her head in, not a clue in the world as to why her husband has called her into his home office.

"Yeah, honey?" Her feminine voice was sweet and innocent. Van almost put the letter down and told Rosa to forget about it, but something told him otherwise. A masculine voice told him that he must lay out the ground and act assertively to negate future insubordination. This voice struck an inner fire and caused him to become more and more enraged.

"What's this?" Van sarcastically asked whilst raising the letter perfectly still. Rosa did not need to read it to know exactly what it was, she already knew.

"Van." Rosa said, her throat violently pierced with thirst. All fluids dried from her throat in complete fear.

"I didn't ask you what my name was ." Van started with his trademark, condescending tone. "I *asked* what this is."

"Alright." She answered, her voice lightly quivering from the lack of moisture within her mouth. "It's a letter that I got from

Neil *several* years ago. I lost it while looking for a stamp, but I see you've found it before I could."

All Van could do was mentally writhe in silence. His very sanity and placements of trust became twisted and contorted. He felt dead on the inside as the fury built up from the masculine voice within his head.

"After *everything* I did. All the sacrifices that I've made. Does that not mean *anything* to you?" He made no eye contact, only opting to look down upon the damning letter that sat motionless upon his desk. "I just want you to tell me why. and don't give me *any* crap, I want to hear the tru--"

"I was." Rosa began in a phlegmy voice. She quickly coughed to recover her intended tone. "I *thought* that you and that Anderson lady had somethi--"

"I told you that she was only a secretary, nothing more and nothing less." Van finished quickly, violently jabbing his fist into his desk, knocking a glass paperweight onto the floor.

"Oh, come on! You expect me to believe that? Jesus Van, those nights that you would talk to her on the phone, you'd do it for hours on end!" She now made herself completely visible within the room, flailing her arms to convey her passionate words. The fuzzy strings on her white house robe almost looked like enraged tentacles.

"She was going through a divorce! Sorry, that caring about the well-being of my trusted employees would make you feel so insecure!" Van joined in, flailing his arms to the same degree of furiousness. He fell back into his black leather chair; his hands gently ran through his sweat-touched hair. He began to breathe

heavily and reach for his chest as a small pain began to make itself apparent. He ignored it.

Rosa vapidly sputtered for something to snap back at Van with, but her feminine lips failed to articulate a cohesive string of words within the English lexicon. She began to notice her husband rise from his seat and reach for something in the study's small closet.

"What are you doing?" She vocally stressed as Van equipped himself with a baseball bat of genuine oak wood that had become harder through petrification over the years. "No. Van. Stop that!"

"I'm going to have a chat with Neil, and you are going to wait here for the kids to come home from school. Afterwards, we'll *never* speak of it again." He finished before spreading his legs to move up and outwards from the study. However, Rosa threw up a futile protest in the shape of using her body as a physical barrier to which she hoped her husband could not pass. He passed through with ease. That was until she viciously clutched onto his forearm.

"No! No! You'll kill him! Don't do it! Don--" Rosa's hysterical cries were swiftly muted by a rough and assertive hand striking upon her delicate face. Her face felt as if it were made of television static as her vision became blurry upon collapsing onto the hardwood floor. All she could do in her silent expression of pain was to contort her body towards her husband who was, at this point, looking over her menacingly and without any regrets of his action.

"You brought this on yourself. Now you and your skimpy suitor will be punished." He gritted in a voice of rage, he turned around and made way for the spiral staircase that led down to the ground floor. "Stupid spunk-hungry whore. That'll fix you."

Rosa began to wail heavily as all she could do was hopelessly listen on as the front door slammed shut and an engine quietly powered on. The last she would hear of Van that day was the distant displacement of gravel being pushed away by tires controlled by a deranged man with intent to inflict damage. She twisted her body back onto the cool and chilled surface of the hardwood to comfort the stinging burn upon her face, but the relief would be immediately canceled out by the hopeless ocean of tears flooding from her squinted eyes.

Chapter 2

Wednesday morning made itself present within the Greenfield Baptist Hospital. As the light began to shine through the blinds and curtains of the waiting rooms, patients desperately awaited the return of family members to engage in visitation once again. However, this mostly pertained to patients who were cognitively aware of their surroundings. Two figures frantically walked within Van's waiting room. One of the figures let out a gentle and feminine gasp, a gasp that was acquainted with the dreary and depressing atmosphere. Despite the negative energy silently pulsating within the room, the nurse that was already present seemed to hold some kind of high spirit amidst the depression.

"Oh!" The nurse delicately exclaimed while looking at her wristwatch to indeed confirm that visiting hours had started. "I just got done finishing up here, I'll go ahead and leave y'all alone."

Rosa pushed out her hand to prevent the nurse from leaving just yet, she still had a question begging to be answered.

"Are the brainwave results in yet?" Her eyes appeared rather deep and empty, longing to be filled with information that could lead to relief or despair.

"Um... Dr. Yates is running a bit late this morning and he won't be in for another hour." The now timid nurse answered, all joy quickly flushed from her tone and posture. It was painfully obvious that her head held troubling information. "I know for a fact that he has the results."

"Couldn't you just tell us? Aren't you his assistant?" Rosa verbally pinned the puny and petite nurse into a corner.

"I wasn't present during the tests. I honestly don't know." The nurse vapidly sputtered as her eyes shifted focus upon the last sentence of her statement. Rosa decided to blissfully ignore the details of the obvious and telltale features within a poorly constructed lie. The lack of eye contact, the hand moving to the face, etc... "I'm sorry."

The nurse passed through the sliding door as the two women stood and watched. The 'silence' within the room began to psychologically tear away at the new guest as Rosa put up a most effective fight against the 'silence'. She crossed her arms and lightly pressed her feet apart.

"Well, here he is, the first time you've seen him since you ran off with that boy." Rosa addressed her daughter with a tone of light cynicism. The tone was alien and strange upon manifesting, even Rosa herself found it sort of strange and off-putting: Perhaps even distasteful given the current situation. Nevertheless, she wanted to get the point across to her daughter, even if it meant doing it at an inappropriate time.

"Oh... Yeah. I-I guess so..." Susy Carston droned as she seemed to pay little attention to whatever mind-games her mother wanted to play. She got next to her father and gently held his hand for the first time in nearly six years.

All Rosa felt she could do was look on as she awkwardly held her sadistic and accusatory stance. Susy paid little to no attention to her mother, all she could do was focus on her father's cold face.

"Can I be alone with dad for a moment?" Susy began with a voice of repented sorrow. "Please?"

Rosa let out a lousy scoff, but she eventually obliged. Without glancing back, Susy heard her mother exit from the room.

She shut the sliding door somewhat dramatically, but not loud enough to cause a disturbance. Upon silence, she was now alone with her father.

She continued to grab onto Van's forearm with a clutching grasp of mourning. Tears began to well within her eyes, but not a single one spilled onto her delicate and youthful skin. She began to breathe heavily through her nose as she fought the urge to lose to grief and make a mess of herself. She had to do something, *anything* to prevent the inevitable. Her lips began to move.

"I remember when you first took me fishing." She managed to utter with a gentle chuckle. "I would always catch the large catfish while you always caught those tiny guppies."

She expected no reply from her father, but the silence of the room somehow disappointed her. Nevertheless, she continued.

"I remember that exact spot. It was a tiny little peninsula on a sandbar that would be submerged for most of the year." She reminisced as the memories of fishing on the Mississippi River began to flood every crevice of her adult mind. "I miss that... So much..."

She grabbed Van's hand and began to delicately cry, fighting her hardest not to blurt out into a frantic wail.

"I saw Sammy in the hallway about an hour ago." She began, desperately gasping for air as to not lose control of her air intake. "And I understand. I understand why you didn't include me."

Her face reflected that of great shame, yet a hint of relief sprawled upon her young and delicate face, like something she wanted to say for the longest time has finally been said. She still

felt petrified nonetheless, even though she was fully aware of her father's lack of input.

"I realize all the mistakes that I've made, and I'm working *hard* to make sure that my children don't make the same mistakes that I did." She calmly stated. Her posture began to loosen up as her feelings unfolded upon her vegetated father. Still, her nerves expected a rage-filled and unreasonable response. "That man that I got with when I left you, I... I don't love him. He's a terrible influence on the children and he's *still* refusing to get himself a job."

She half expected her father's eyes to glance open and reveal the haggard old eyes that bore many years of stress and hardship, like two gleaming piles of dung in an ocean of dingy yellow. A salted tear trembled to the clean hospital floor, followed by intense sniffling. Susy used the heel of her hands to wipe away the flooding mess around her eyes as she swiftly walked over to her father. She leaned in for a hug, all the while dampening Van's hospital gown with tears of grief. She wasn't quite ready to say goodbye, but she knew that she was on the road to finally accepting the situation for what it was.

"I want you to come back, I want you to be the grandfather that you never got to be." She nearly whispered while still embracing her father. "They say that it is doubtful that--"

Susy was suddenly interrupted by the sliding door of the emergency room opening violently, crashing against the metallic door frame.

"Hey!" The familiar voice began. "Who the *hell* said you could be in here?"

Susy jumped up from her father's embrace upon the startling entrance of her tempered brother.

"J-Jojo. Wha--" She stuttered before being interrupted.

"Sorry, He's unavailable for you to borrow money right now. He's a little preoccupied at the moment." Jojo loudly remarked in a juvenile and sarcastic tone.

Susy was caught within the headlights, choked on her salty tears, and struggling to comprehend the situation amongst her grieving. She finally collected herself and spoke against the intruder.

"Stop yelling, you're going to get yourself in trouble." Her voice trembled with the command, making her request fall short as weak and cowardly.

"I'll stop yelling when you get the hell out of here!" Jojo shouted. At this point, a nurse timidly poked her head into scope out the situation. The footfalls of a security guard could be heard turning the corner and confronting the heated conflict. Rosa pushed the nurse aside and confronted her son.

"Jojo, that's enough." Rosa sternly vocalized without being too loud. Jojo clenched his fists violently and faced his mother.

"Why are you defending *her*?" Jojo shouted even louder, pointing his accusing finger in Susy's direction. "You want her gone as much as I do, and when it comes right down to it, you don't move a muscle when she's around you!"

Vapid footfalls began to echo out from the silent hallway. Still, Jojo remained within his position, unmoving and enraged.

"Bro... C-calm down." Susy emotionally squeaked. She held her firm stance, the anxiety of the situation was petrifying. Jojo responded with hysterical laughter derived from pure madness.

"Get the hell out. Nobody wants you here." He softly spoke while laughing: No response.

"I said get the *hell* out before I drag you out myself!" Jojo shouted, startling every single spectator.

Finally, the footfalls ceased as a testosterone-coated voice yelled out a command.

"Sir, you must leave now." The security guard demanded, he made sure to keep his distance from the potential threat whilst still maintaining his aura of intimidation.

"You need to remove this woman." Jojo began, pointing at his sister. "She's mentally deranged and needs to leave."

"Now sir!" The burly security guard shouted, resting a twitchy hand upon his taser. Jojo was startled and humiliated by the guard's robust attempt at ceasing his tantrum. Alas, he walked towards the security guard in a slouched posture. He stopped dead in his strut upon encountering the doorframe.

"Stupid *bitch*." Jojo loudly mumbled before having the security officer escort him from the room.

Silence lingered as all personnel held a bitter stare upon Susy as she wiped her tears away and walked towards her mother. After the elevator doors closed, time resumed without skipping a single beat, yet the sickly atmosphere felt timeless to both Rosa and Susy. The sliding glass door automatically shut itself after all eavesdropping eyes were pried away from the scene that had just occurred, sealing inside the mother, daughter, and brainless father.

Rosa sighed as her face began to blush an angry crimson shade, but Susy foolishly assumed the rage came from an obvious source.

"He." Susy breathlessly began. "He hasn't changed a bit, huh?"

Her mother's face was still stung with rage as the corners of her mouth swiftly quivered. Her darting eyes stricken with veins of fatigue began to taunt Susy with steady vibrations of the furious variety. She then began to realize that her mother was angry at something else.

"Maybe he's right." Rosa began, eyes still honed on her daughter's deep brown eyes. "Gertrude has had just about enough of your damn kids. It's time for you to leave."

Rosa then slid open the glass and retired to the waiting room with the rest of the family, leaving her daughter baffled and in shock at what her mother had just proclaimed. Her head drooped as the life support machine continued to beep, maddening its listeners with its monotone chime.

After several minutes of zoning away at the calming baby blue tile of the hospital, Susy slowly skulked forward towards the sliding door. After much hesitation, she slid open the door and made her way towards the waiting room, where she would apprehend her children and return home.

An hour had passed after Susy left when Gertrude, Rosa, and Jojo found their way back within the hospital room. Rosa and Gertrude sat within the provided folding chairs while Jojo anxiously paced back and forth, dreading the belated arrival of Dr. Yates. Finally, the door slid open as the doctor reluctantly slithered his way inside. Everyone jumped at the presence of the doctor, his look of

utter anguish and eyes of sleeplessness only drilled in more distress amongst the scrambling family members. Once everyone was upon their feet and beading their eyes upon him, Dr. Yates began to speak.

"In a comatose patient, we are looking for patterns of cognitive improvement through linear or exponential increases in brain frequencies. That would mean that the patient's brain is healing from its state of comatose, and the patient would soon be able to awaken from their coma." Dr. Yates began to hesitate, but he cleared his throat and began revealing the chilling news. "Mr. Carston has demonstrated severe cognitive decline on every single test we ran."

Silence befell the room. The family sought out *anything* within the doctor's statement that would unveil any kind of confirmation bias.

"Well." Rosa began with reluctance. "What does this mean for Van?"

"I'm afraid that even his life support won't be able to keep him alive for much longer." Dr. Yates blankly stated.

"No... No... This can't be right. He had a chance... And..." Gertrude could speak no longer, for her wrinkled face became dressed in muting tears.

"This, unfortunately, leaves you all with two options: Let Mr. Carston pass when the life support fails, or we can arrange to have him taken off of life support entirely." Dr. Yates proclaimed in a professional tone that was devoid of any kind of sympathy.

"This is..." Jojo began, his throat pierced with fluid deprivation. "He was supposed to..."

Everyone else remained silent in anticipation: They eagerly waited for Jojo to complete his broken and detached rambling. However, dissatisfaction settled once Jojo childishly slammed his feet and the ground.

"NO!" Jojo screamed. He turned and ripped the door open and slammed it behind him, nearly cracking the glass of the door. Nobody intervened, they just either stood or sat down in shock. Dr. Yates desperately wanted to leave, but he knew that he had to fulfill his duties and discuss with his patient's family.

"So, there's nothing that we can do?" Rosa squealed, her voice wavy and deep from being on the verge of tears.

"I'm afraid so." Dr. Yates reluctantly responded. "The decision will have to be made."

At this point, Gertrude began to wail viciously. Rosa, for the first time, began to have tears well up in her eyes. Previously she had only lazily mewled in her empty bed, but in the face of her worst fear, she was finally empty: Empty beyond the point of knowing what to do next within her dwindling life.

The room became repetitive: Gertrude remained upon her son's shoulder, Rosa calmly sat at the foot of the hospital bed, and Dr. Yates awkwardly lingered whilst gripping on to his discount plastic clipboard. Time appeared to stand still, yet it grated on unbearably for what seemed like several hours. Eventually, the doctor managed to retire from the room without either of the women noticing.

The sobbing eventually ceased as the women also retired to the waiting room, where they would inform the rest of the family of the fate of Van Carston. The ICU fell empty and void of activity for several hours.

Unfamiliar footfalls intruded the temporarily forgotten room. Footfalls that belonged to that of a stoic and unyielding man, a man who deliberately dominates every room he has ever walked within. The very floor seemed to be flattered by his presence; only responding with complimentary clicks and clacks that could satisfy the most tone-deaf. His attire, while hardly fitting the occasion, still caught the attention of many nurses within the ICU. His strut was suave and majestic, only to be matched by a man with high confidence, and an even higher ego. Feminine footfalls followed slowly behind the extravagant man.

"Well." Rosa hesitantly began with a voice devoid of compassion. "Here he is."

"Oh, Jesus." The man said aloud, walking forward and further exposing his face to the room. Though his age matched Van's, he still somewhat held a face free of wrinkles and a full head of ashy blonde hair that was relatively free of greying. His eyes were as piercing blue as the day he was born. "What's his condition?"

No response. The man cocked his head over to weed out a response, but it took several numbing seconds for Rosa to open her lips to respond.

"It isn't good Neil." Rosa responded; her voice delicately wavy from being on the verge of tears. "It's really *really* bad."

Rosa then began to sob delicately: Breath by breath, she longed for Neil's calming embrace. Her wish was immediately granted, for she was pulled into a soothing clasp.

"It's going to be okay Rosie doll." That was all he managed to muster. He was surprised when Rosa ceased her shaking and hyperventilating. It once again instilled a vigorous surge in his charisma.

"Listen to me." Neil delicately groaned while using his knuckle to raise Rosa's chin. Her face was stained with the marks of where tears had once treaded, but her dark brown eyes sat still, patient and listening. "I know it must be exhausting to stay in that house while your husband is in here."

Thirty seconds of silence passed as Rosa quietly pondered the proposal. She briefly bit the bottom of her lip as her eyes faintly darted around the brightly lit hallway where the two stood. Neil finally spoke up once more to break up the silence.

"If you need a place to stay at all, you can always take the guest bedroom in my house; you *and* the rest of the family can stay with me if y'all need it." Neil explained in a soft, delicate voice. He moved his hand to Rosa's lower back during the embrace; she didn't seem to notice this within the moment.

"Okay." Rosa began while tightening her embrace. "We will consider it. Thank you, Neil..."

Silence befell as an unsightly grin struck Neil's face, a crooked grin that would not ordinarily be held by a man with honest intentions. He moved his hands up to her shoulders and pulled himself out from the embrace. Rosa began to slightly move towards Neil's face. However, her slow movement suddenly ceased when Neil decided to speak up, immediately interrupted the suggestions proposed by Rosa's feminine body language.

"I hate to ask you, but I was wondering if I could have the room to myself for a little bit." Neil kindly asked while pulling Rosa out of her immature daydream. "I know me and him haven't

gotten along this past decade or so, but at the end of the day, we were once inseparable business partners, and above all else, friends. I'd love to have a moment to say goodbye."

"Oh, yes." Rosa replied in a tone that contained a minor hint of disappointment. The sudden rip from her entranced state gave her temporary mental whiplash. "Absolutely Neil."

She moved away from Neil and to the sliding glass door. She slid it open and moved through the haunting doorway. She suddenly stopped in the open doorway and halfway turned her body to face Neil.

"I'll be in the waiting room when you're done. Get a nurse if something happens." Rosa requested as she began closing the sliding door.

"Absolutely darling." Neil answered, causing Rosa to lightly blush.

The clicks of her stilettos slowly faded amongst the soft ambiance of the ICU. He stood there, staring at his old business partner for minutes on end without speaking a single word. Finally, he began to step forward with his arms behind his back, stopping at the foot of the hospital bed.

"I spoke to your boy a little bit ago." He began. "Poor thing is taking it hard. Little does he know: He's doing God's work."

Neil began to pace himself from the South-East to the North-West walls of the hospital room. His right hand still gripping his left wrist.

"How pathetic. The great Van Carston, owner of nearly every hotel and diner in town, yet I still stand before you, claiming

your wife as my own." He spoke in a lightly shrilling voice. "She didn't even feel bad for trying to kiss me right in front of your pathetic little death bed. And she *just* heard the tragic news this very morning!"

He held his hand upon his forehead, easing the mental shock of it all. He was enjoying every last word that was being milked from his tongue. At this moment, Neil felt a sweet sensation upon his palette after every single detrimental syllable squeezed from his cavity. His brain swayed and rolled in a potent puddle of dopamine from the satisfaction he was experiencing.

"But wait! It doesn't end there!" He nearly yelled, he remained quiet enough so that no wandering nurse could detect any kind of disturbance. "I offered your daughter one of my apartments and a job at the complex."

The sweetness upon his lips felt as if he was wearing a flavored lip balm. At this point, his brain was utterly drowning in all of its grotesque and pulsating feel-good chemicals.

"Oh Van, those dirty eyes she flashed at me." He began while his head swooned back and forth. "I ought to stick it to her on the side while I take a bite out of your widowed wife."

He walked to the left side of Van and leaned into his ear.

"You wouldn't mind that, now would you hoss?" He nearly whispered.

He didn't care that Van couldn't reply, yet it still felt amazing to say it to him, nonetheless. Brain or no brain. Life or no life.

"I want you to look up at me from Hell when you die. I want you to witness me re-furnishing your establishments, sexing

your wife *and* daughter, and propping my feet up on your old desk!" He exclaimed while waving his arms around. He stopped and turned back to Van. "And I want you to witness all of that while thinking about what you did to my brother all those years ago. You sick murderer."

Neil slid a metal folding chair to the left side of Van and took a seat. He stared at Van's lifeless face for several minutes, but no response came out from the dying man's husk. Neil began grinning. With his right hand, he used his index finger to dig deep within his right nostril. After searching for the perfect sample, Neil pulled an average-sized wad of snot from the dark crevices of his nose. Neil then proceeded to wipe the intact ball of snot behind Van's left ear.

"A gift from me to you, old pal." Neil laughed while rising from his seat. "I bid you farewell, asshole!"

Neil exited the room without hesitation, a small and unrealistic fear of Van waking up and retaliating made him move a bit faster than usual.

Nobody else visited that night except for the stray nurse who performed her routine procedures. Everybody was exhausted from a sleepless night, and they all longed to return home and sleep. Rosa took Neil up on his offer and left with him from the hospital, riding in his new Mercedes. Jojo and Gertrude rode home shortly thereafter, saying nothing through the awkward and miserable ten-minute drive back home. Susy had long since gathered her children from Gertrude. However, Gertrude enjoyed the children's company despite what Rosa expressed within her fit of rage. Susy's children enjoyed being with their great-grandmother as well.

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Eight Years Prior

A young lady sat within the passenger seat of the black 1997 Ford f150. Her teenage fingers twiddled with anxiety as her wrists gently rested upon her belly. A million thoughts raced within her head, thoughts that she knew needed to be vocalized almost immediately, for soon it would be obvious once she began... *Showing*.

The atmosphere was pristine, a hot summer's heat was blasted away by a cool and refreshing air conditioning unit. Not a single cloud polluted the sky that day. Though the air was soupy, the relieving chill emitting from the vents easily retained the nature of beauty whilst removing all of the undesirable attributes of such a humid day. The teenage girl reluctantly looked from her window to spy on some children playing on an old Slip 'N Slide, their joyful and worry-free giggling could be seen but not heard. The girl became saddened by the reminder of her dwindling youth and her reluctant passage into adulthood.

A Johnny Cash Cassette gently played in the background, further complementing the hot summer day in the small Tennessee town. The driver mildly hummed the enchanting tune as his burly hands lightly smacked against the leather-gripped steering wheel.

I met her accidentally in St. Paul Minnesota.

And it tore me up every time I heard her drawl, Southern drawl.

Then I heard my dream was back downstream cavortin' in Davenport,

And I followed you Big River when you called.

The man turned his head towards his teenage daughter and noticed that she seemed to be stressed out about something. Clueless, the man proceeded with caution by asking a relatively safe question.

"So how was school today Susy?" Van calmly asked, leaving his eyes glued to the road.

"Oh." Susy timidly replied. The question had caught her off-guard. Her train of thought was suddenly spirited away from dreadful anticipation: Now, she was in the hot seat. "It was okay."

It was at that point Van knew that he needed to be more direct. Perhaps, a broad question about her obvious emotion would be most appropriate. He let out a brief sigh and began speaking once more.

"Are you doing alright sweetheart?" He asked, still opting to keep his eyes glued to the road and his mirrors. Silence befell for almost half a minute before Susy spoke up.

"Daddy." She began in a weak and degrading tone. "Promise me you won't be mad."

Fear pounded on Van's heart. He could only muster a dry and deepened monotone shrill. He could not bring himself to accept a promise that he knew that he would not be able to fulfill. Despite what he feared most, he continued to listen carefully. His daughter drew a wavy breath, preparing for what she was about to muster from her throat.

"I'm pregnant." She stated, dry and emotionless. Her core rattled wildly as her heart gave a devastating thump. She could not bear to keep her eyes open to gaze upon her father's initial reaction. However, she could not leave her eyes closed forever, they eventually found themselves pried open, opting to focus on the optical illusion of flowing water blanketing the road ahead.

Van had little of an initial reaction: All he did was flick on his hazard lights and move to the shoulder of the highway. Every agonizing second of deceleration only increased Susy's stress exponentially. She had no idea what kind of ride she was in for. Johnny Cash's ode to the weeping willow faded into nothingness, only to be replaced by the sounds of the hazard lights. *click clack click clack click clack click clack.*

"It was an accident." Susy began, her throat became pierced in fear and reluctance. "Me and Andy wanted to, you know. And we... I made a mistake and--"

"Oh yeah." Van started with his trademark sternness. "You made a damn mistake alright."

Susy shifted in her seat, desperately trying to alleviate tension through some kind of posture. However, no posture could prepare her for the earful she was about to expect.

"How could you do this? You not only tarnished *our* reputation; you've ruined your whole god damn life!" Van yelled, slamming his burly fist against the dashboard.

"Well." Susy reluctantly began. "It isn't that bad. I mean, we're rich after all, right?"

"*Rich?*" Van spewed a hearty and hysterical laugh while slamming his hands upon the steering wheel. "I'll tell 'ya what's rich: The tiniest thought of me helping out my leg-spreading whore of a daughter while every guy in town gets their rocks off. I'll tell you: *That's* rich!"

Tears began to flood from Susy's eyes as she became flabbergasted by what her father was going on about. She brazened a spark of courage from within her inner fire.

"Well, you're supposed to support your daughter in this situation." She boldly stated to her father.

"Maybe if I was a pussy-footing pushover dad, but that's not the case now is it?" He quickly responded. The hazard lights continued as if nothing else was happening. The summer heat began leaking from outside as beads of sweat protruded from his and her brow.

"Whatever." She scoffed in anger. "Chase already said that he'd take care of me and the baby."

"With what?" Van swiftly quipped back. "Tell me what money he makes other than spotting in his daddy's cotton fields!"

"He's going to be a welder. He'll make six figures." Susy pathetically responded in a whimpering and whiny voice of a child.

"Oh yeah?" Van chuckled. "That boy's head is about as hard as the metal that he can hardly weld. I've seen better jobs done by Parkinson-stricken grandmas down at the nursing home."

"Well, at least he cares about me! He wants to help me raise our child and put a roof over our heads." She exclaimed. "He loves me, and I love him."

"Oh, *love?*" Van heartily laughed once more, dreadful and joyful tears rolled down his cheeks. "You only met this boy three months ago Susy! You and I both know that boy only cares about dip, booze, and lighting farts with his goons. Is that inbred asshole the kind of father you want your kid to idolize?"

"Your mother gave you the talk and everything. You *still* couldn't stop and wrap it up. Pathetic." He spoke from the palm of his hand; soaking oily sweat from the surface of his face. Suddenly, he heard the passenger door open.

"That's it." Susy whispered under her breath while unclicking her seatbelt and slipping out from the passenger door.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" He shouted from his unmoving nylon seat.

"Chase is going to take care of me and I'm going to prove your judgmental ass wrong!" Susy viciously yelled from outside of the vehicle. "I'll prove you *all* wrong!"

"Susy. If you leave now, you'll be all on your own for the rest of your life!" Van shouted from the truck. "Me and your mother will *never* help you out. You still want to run off with that damn hick?"

She looked upon her father's eyes, her face crumpled in a stern expression of rage and guilt. Tears rolled from her eyes like two tiny waterfalls. She licked her lips to taste the saltiness within the leakage. She breathed in loudly through her stuffy nose.

"I've never been surer of anything in my entire life. Me and Andy love each other and that's all we--." Susy calmly explained before being interrupted by the loudest shout that she had ever heard from her father.

"Then get the hell out of here with that fairy tale crap!" Van ripped from his vocal cords. "Have a good rest of your life slut!"

Susy slammed the door as Van started his engine. He raced off so fast that his tires produced an unbearable screech. He continued flooring his gas pedal until he built up a reasonable amount of distance from his daughter. The last time he would ever see Susy was that day: When he gazed at her within his

passenger-side mirror. The last thing that he saw her do was sit down upon the grassy earth and cry into her soft and delicate hands.

Chapter 3

Jojo was the earliest for visitation. He stayed within his father's room since visiting hours had begun at eight o'clock that morning. It did not take long for him to nod off and drift away into a deep sleep: The swiftness and heaviness of his slumber was a true testament to the deprivation of sleep he had experienced ever since the accident. It relaxed him that, for a brief moment, he could be alone with his father and forget about the accident: Forget about his guilt: Forget about, everything.

The nurse busted in, causing Jojo to jump from his chair and gaze upon the nurse in horror. His chest pounded as Rosa and Gertrude came in from behind the nurse. His pasty and saggy eyelids stared at the intruders. The nurse swiftly changed out the fluid bag of the IV and left, wanting nothing to do with the depressing aura within the room. Gertrude and Rosa sat on the opposite side of the hospital bed from Jojo. Rosa crumpled open a brown McDonald's bag and dug for the breakfast contents within.

"Son I got you a sausage egg and cheese biscuit." Rosa said while holding the breakfast wrapping within her hand.

"Not hungry." Jojo responded in a dry and dreary tone: It was clear to both of the women that he was not interested in speaking.

"Are you sure?" Rosa asked in a gentle and soothing tone of maternal affection. "I don't think I've seen you eat anything since--"

"I'm... Not... Hungry..." Jojo responded in his dreariest tone. His bloodshot eyes stared into his mother's soul, judging her intensely. Gertrude gazed at both of them, opting to not have any

kind of part within the ensuing madness. Rosa broke eye contact while shaking her head and fluttering her eyes. She blindly handed her mother-in-law the breakfast sandwich that she had offered to her son.

"Oh." Gertrude muttered while gazing at the delectable offering. "Thank you, sweetie."

Both of the women ate in silence. Rosa could only stare at the floor, avoiding contact with her husband's closed eyes, her son's bloodshot eyes, and anything leading to the outside world. She felt trapped within her head. Gertrude, on the other hand, gazed up at the television upon the wall. The morning news showed the weather forecast for Vanderdale county. Clear, warm, and sunny until Sunday, where scattered thundershowers were predicted.

Rosa broke her binding gaze from the floor and upon her son's weary figure: He slouched rebelliously with eyes drooping and crossing from complete exhaustion. Both hands dangled from the sides of the chair in a gentle and dreary swoon.

"Jojo, when was the last time you slept?" Rosa asked, doing a serviceable job at hiding her fatigue.

"I don't want to talk about it." Jojo moaned. "I don't want to talk about *anything*."

"You look tired is all I'm saying." Rosa began. "Maybe you should go home and get so--"

"I'm not leaving until I hear that *thing* flatline!" Jojo shouted after storming to his feet and flailing the metal folding chair to the ground.

"Lower your voice son." Rosa suggested in a timid squeal, but her request in a thunderous response. It began to remind her of Van.

"Did you lower *your* voice when you were screwing Mr. Bradford last night?" Jojo shouted accusingly towards her mother.

both of the women in the room gasped in shock. Rosa nervously shifted in her seat while Gertrude raised two clasped hands to her gaping mouth.

"Alexander Jojo Carston." Gertrude spoke in a gasping tone. "That is no kind of way to talk in front of your father!"

"What's he going to do grandma?" Jojo yelled at Gertrude. "Will he wake up and beat my ass like he always does?"

At this point, tears streamed from Gertrude's eyes, the salted droplets followed the age creases upon her face. She began to wipe them away with the sleeve of her jacket.

"Please." Gertrude delicately moaned in a fit of sadness. "Just calm down."

"Okay, no." Jojo began in his loud, stern tone. "We both know that mom cheated on dad before! And nobody said a *damn* thing when she ran off to 'talk' to Mr. Bradford yesterday. That scum-sucking suave geezer tried to talk me into giving him *my half* of the company!"

Silence befell the room as both Rosa and Gertrude sat in total shock. Jojo raised the chair back into position with the heel of his left foot and flailed his body back within the cold, hard metal seat.

"Maybe it will work on mom, but it ain't working on me." Jojo finally groaned before leaning his head back and closing his eyes.

An associate peeked his head within the room to spot where the shouting was coming from. He immediately drew his head away, presuming that the disturbance originated from elsewhere.

Jojo flung his hands upon his eyes and harshly rubbed them dry from any tears. He let out a long and drawn-out sigh.

"It stinks in here." Jojo began while rising and walking towards the door. "Maybe it's best if I did get some rest after all. Let me know when that old hard ass croaks."

Rosa began crying viciously upon the closure of the sliding door. Gertrude immediately offered a soothing hand of comfort. Still, Rosa's wails droned on and on, echoing amongst the mechanical sounds of the life-support machine.

"It's okay sweetheart." Gertrude softly stated while rubbing her hand on Rosa's shoulder blade. "He's gone now."

"This has changed him so much." Rosa cried into her feminine hands. Gertrude struggled to find something to say, she felt it was her duty to find any kind of way to make her daughter-in-law feel better.

"It's a lot of stress on him." Gertrude began. "He was there when *it* happened after all."

"He." Rosa choked from her strained vocal cords. "He's starting to become his father."

Rosa's sobbing continued as Gertrude thought about what she had just proclaimed. 'become his father.' While she could

admit that Jojo grew into his temper; she just could not see him as the man she had raised almost single-handedly. Therefore, Gertrude concluded that Rosa was only alluding to his unnaturally short temper and painfully brief patience. She could only hope that Jojo was capable of forgiveness. Her mind began to shift to what he said about Mr. Bradford.

"Honey, what was Jojo talking about?" Gertrude asked in a subliminal tone of accusation. Rosa's cries began to soften as shame and regret started to settle in all at once. "You didn't seriously sleep with that man last night, did you?"

Rosa's cries finally settled into light sniffles as she began to anxiously shift in her seat. She could not look Gertrude in the eyes. Her heart bounced and quivered in paralyzing fear. She anticipated a swift hand to strike her across the face. Needless to say, she was very well accustomed to the embrace of the tough and painful variety. She lightly nodded as tears poured from her eyes in buckets.

"Oh lord." Gertrude lightly muttered.

"Momma Gertrude, if you'd hear me out, I can explain." Rosa frantically scrambled. Gertrude cocked her head in a listening position. Her patience showed no limits.

"I got jealous." Rosa began to explain. This caused her mother-in-law to raise an eyebrow in confusion. Her arms remained crossed as her biscuit remained half-eaten.

"That Anderson lady that was Van's receptionist. He was always fond of her, sometimes more so than me. She started going through a divorce sometime when the kids were still little." Rosa frantically explained without skipping any detail. "The nights he'd

stay up on the phone with her: You'd think that they were middle-schoolers."

"So, my son cheated on you with this woman?" Gertrude asked in a tone of concern.

"Well, I guess that's what I thought at the time." Rosa shamefully explained. Her thin brow crumbled from the question she was posed. "I never really got any proof that he was doing something behind my back, but I *felt* it: I knew something was there, but now when I look back at it... I'm not so sure."

Gertrude gave a shocked expression. She looked as if she were about to faint. She crumbled the brightly-colored wrapping paper of her breakfast sandwich and stored it within her massive leather purse.

"Me and Neil just started talking one day when he visited us for dinner for some kind of unofficial business meeting with Van. He was so sweet when Van constantly ignored and disregarded anything I had to say. His eyes, they saw every single ounce of pain I was feeling." Rosa droned while still sniffling.

"So, you decided to cheat on my son because you thought that he was cheating on you, and you eventually fell in love with Mr. Bradford?" Gertrude questioned with a frail tone.

"I mean, I don't think I 'fell in *love* with him. I just wanted somebody around who could take care of my needs: Somebody who would listen; be there for me." Rose shamefully uttered. "Oh, Momma Gertrude, please don't be angry, I--"

"I'm not angry with you. It hardly matters now I suppose." Gertrude responded with her wrinkled hand raised in the air. "My

son never was the loving type anyways: Well, maybe not after knowing him for a year or two. I don't think I entirely blame you."

Her heart rate dropped instantly. Though she still felt ashamed, she still at least felt somewhat forgiven for what she had done. A tinge of worry and unease still festered within her gut, however. Rosa finally looked into the old woman's eyes; she was not finished speaking.

"There is something that I need to talk to you about though." Gertrude spoke in a cold and explorative tone. "I invited Susy to come back."

Rosa was instantly shaken. She felt a cold flash journey up and down her spinal cord as her limbs began to stiffen up. She gritted her teeth bitterly as her fingers curled to meet her crimson red fingernails.

"You *what*?" Rosa questioned in a chilled tone. Her arms began to seethe in goosebumps. The hairs on her neck began to stand.

"I said that I've invited Susy to come back." Gertrude responded sarcastically, or at least as sarcastic as a woman of her age could muster. "Perhaps I can forgive you for sleeping around on my son, but my forgiveness does not extend to the ways that you and Jojo treat my granddaughter."

"Momma Gertrude." Rosa uttered in shock. "I know that you've seen all of the things that she's done."

"Yes, I've seen what she's done." Gertrude began: Her voice frail, but drilling. "Everyone in this family has problems. For instance, you are an adulterer."

"Mamma--" Rosa attempted to interrupt.

"Hush." Gertrude groaned, regaining her fragile and dwindling train of thought. "You are an adulterer that struggles in conveying basic emotion. Your son is unintelligent, selfish, is unable to hold his temper or tongue, and is often morbid. Van is an angry, borderline sadistic brute."

It seemed as if silence clocked in and intended to get in some overtime. However, Gertrude had one last thing to say to further drive the screw in.

"The only difference between you four is Susy was unable to hide her sins." Gertrude began. "At least she has been trying to overcome them. I've been helping her every step of the way when you and Van refused to do so."

Tears began to well from Rosa's eyes as she stared down at the baby blue tile once again. Her vision became severely strained as streams of sadness washed from her face. Her voluptuous lips quivered as she struggled for something to say.

"How will Jojo react? What if he's violent?" Rosa sniffled through the tears.

"I'm certain he's incapable of violence." Gertrude began. "It's up to him if he wants to forgive his sister. I guess that it's also up to you if forgiveness is on the table."

Gertrude embraced her daughter-in-law and soaked her tears into the jacket that she was wearing. She curled her aged fingers through Rosa's hair and comforted her to the best of her ability.

"If you forgive your daughter for the poor decisions that she has made, then I'll forgive you for cheating on my son with Mr.

Bradford." Gertrude proposed while pulling Rosa from her embrace. "Are you ready to forgive your daughter?"

Rosa fell silent for several seconds, she did not know what to respond with. Guilt clogged her throat as her mind teetered between her blood and her pride: Then, she racked her brain on which would be more deserving of preservation. Finally, she gathered her racing thoughts.

"I just..." Rosa strained her voice; looking for the right words to string together. "I'll talk to her when she arrives."

Gertrude stretched a dim smile for the first time since her son was hospitalized. It felt out of place for Rosa, but she still felt relieved, nonetheless. They once again embraced as Rosa slowly ceased her crying.

"I called her a few hours ago." Gertrude explained. "I told her to drop her kids off at Judy's place for a bit. She should be here at around three o'clock."

Rosa fixated her stare from the floor to her husband. He still laid in the same position as when he was admitted. His golden wedding ring gently gleamed upon the dull surface of the bland hospital blanket. She moved her hand down to her left ring finger, as she felt for the tell-tale groove of absentia. The strange birthmark on her ring finger had a noticeable different texture than the rest of the skin surrounding it.

The sliding glass door once again opened. Susy Carston stepped through with pure reluctance and potent anxiety: However, these emotions quickly subsided upon seeing a warm and welcoming expression from her grandmother. She had arrived

earlier than intended, but Gertrude only cared about her showing up, no matter if it was late *or* early.

"Come on in and sit, doll." Gertrude requested, lightly tapping her hand on the seat that Rosa was sitting in ten minutes prior.

Susy obliged and sat down. She lowered her purse to the foot of the seat when she noticed that her mother's purse was occupying the same space. A chill ran up her spine as she felt that she was about to be yelled at by either her mother or her brother. She let go of the strap and lightly tucked the purse behind the chair with the heel of her foot. Her posture quickly shifted to a silent, yet obvious stance of light panic. Her chest felt as if it were on the brink of collapsing as she nervously twiddled her fingers within her lap. Her fingers flailed back and forth in the same rhythm as when she revealed her first pregnancy to her father many years prior. She tried to find comfort by gripping part of the hospital bed.

"Who else is here grandma?" Susy asked. Deep down, she already knew but was searching for any kind of definitive answer to quell her anxious state.

"Your mother left to get some coffee a little while ago." Gertrude graciously began with her response. "Your brother fell asleep in the waiting room: Poor thing."

"Oh boy." Susy sighed while clutching onto the hard plastic railing of the bed that her father occupied. As to be expected, he still had not moved a muscle since she first gazed upon his shallow and thoughtless husk. "They aren't going to be happy seeing me, huh?"

"I can't speak for your brother." Gertrude lightly giggled in her charming old lady tone. "But I and your mother want to have a civil discussion with you."

"About what?" Susy swiftly asked in a nervous voice: Her throat had become lightly dry and hoarse from the silent panic marinating her young brain.

"I'd prefer to wait until your mother returns." Gertrude started. "But I can guarantee that there are changes that are going to be made."

Susy attempted a tiny smile upon what she had heard. Her attempt became futile when her gaze fixated upon her father. His face was as colorless as the day he was admitted, only it appeared to have gotten worse. She began to frown.

"I remember when you were in that school play during the eighth grade." Gertrude reminisced in an aspiring historian's tone. "I and your dad went out to watch you while your mother was taking care of Jojo when he had the flu."

The memories flooded back from looking at her father's face. The masculine shape it held, the bushy eyebrows: Every memory of the play and the rehearsal replayed flawlessly within her memories of youth. Gertrude began to lightly chuckle while placing her hand on her granddaughter's forearm.

"You and your daddy would practice and practice and practice for weeks: I've never seen him prouder of you than when you said your lines flawlessly. I remember him nearly crying when you said that one line that always tripped you up-" Gertrude began losing her train of thought. "Eh, what was it again sweetie?"

"Oh, that your frowns would teach my smiles such skill." Susy remembered the line flawlessly. "It was always a bit of a tongue twister for me."

"Heh, after all these years you *still* remember." Gertrude droned while staring into her young granddaughter's face.

"I could probably recite that entire play word-for-word if I had the afternoon to spare." Susy boasted while holding a soft and gentle smile upon her face.

"The way that you and your daddy practiced, he probably could too." Gertrude grinned from her false teeth.

Both Gertrude and Susy began laughing lightly. It was the first time that genuine laughter had broken out within the room since Van was admitted: It felt oddly warm and belonging. Nothing about the laughter felt cruel or unnatural. The wounds of grief were already being alleviated, even though Van was not even technically dead yet.

"I remember that I was always his favorite: Jojo acted out pretty much every day and I usually behaved." Susy aimlessly stated. Her throat became devoid of moisture as her strained voice almost struggled to produce a sound. "But that all changed instantly. For the first time in my entire life, he was so disappointed in me the moment that I revealed my pregnancy."

Gertrude had nothing to say: She was swiftly scrambling for something to say that would make her granddaughter feel better.

"There was no hesitation whatsoever. Not even a phone call." Susy's head fell even further. Her eyes staring at the denim crease that repeated themselves upon the length of her legs.

"Well." Gertrude began. "Your mother was devastated when Van made it home without you."

Susy was unmoved. Her dreary attitude was deep and stubborn. There was almost nothing that could pull her from that wretched state of mind. Chills began to run up her arms as her breathing became heavy. She was trying with all her might to prevent the tears from spilling.

"I don't know exactly what happened, but your mother was angry at Van rather than you." Gertrude began to explain in her frail voice. "There was a lot of arguing and crying that I didn't want to intervene with. In hindsight, I probably should have raised some concern."

Gertrude could tell more, *a lot* more. However, she tried to keep from tarnishing her son's name as much as possible.

"Your mother eventually agreed with Van." Gertrude's voice delicately cracked. "However, she was very hesitant. Heck, she even tried to get in contact with you several times, but you were good at covering your footprints."

Susy gently gazed up to meet eye contact with her grandmother. Her eyes were not bloodshot; however, they had a strange yellow tint to them.

"Eventually she gave up. Not from a lack of trying, but through a lack of ability I guess." Gertrude finished.

"But *you* didn't give up." Susy began as hot tears rolled down her raw cheeks. "A few years later you found me."

Gertrude rested her veiny hand on Susy's resting thigh. She could feel the intense tremors that rattled her granddaughter's body.

"I was on that..." Susy choked. She swiftly cleared her throat to further articulate her statement. "And you helped me get off of it when nobody else would."

"It's alright sweetie." Gertrude moaned as she withdrew the crying girl's face upon her shoulder. Susy reverted to a child, trapped in a voluptuous adult female body, but never having the chance to completely mature and truly retain independence.

Gertrude's focus began to droop towards Van, who unsurprisingly has not moved a single inch since his admission. She was searching for something to say, but her train of thought kept derailing indefinitely.

"I'm sure he regrets what he did." Gertrude said through her false teeth. "If he had a chance to do it over again, I'm sure the outcome would have been different."

Susy picked up on the lie but did not say anything to contradict her grandmother's statement. Her mind was too occupied to formulate a cohesive response.

Suddenly, her youthful heart skipped a beat as the glass sliding door began to woosh open ever so slowly. She glanced up at her mother. Two Styrofoam cups of hot coffee rested within her slightly wrinkled hands. Her face was void of life and color, much like her husband's. She could only stand within the doorway and make awkward eye contact with her daughter. The events of the previous night weighed heavily on her aging mind: She refused to speak first.

"Hi, mom." Susy squelched. Her eyes darted to avoid prolonged eye contact, but her mother's gaze was fixed and unbreaking.

"Hey." Rosa responded. Her voice was without sleep, and her eyes were without rest: Bloodshot and begging for a full night's sleep. However, she stayed awake for most of the previous night (and the night before that as well).

The agonizing silence was deafening. Rosa's ears began to ring with tinnitus; a condition that her mother-in-law was all too familiar with. Suddenly her heart began to thump within her head. She could hear the individual blood cells pumping through her eardrums and moving to the rest of the body. She could feel the flesh around her skull tightening as her breathing began to become deep and pronounced.

"You wanted to talk about..." Susy anxiously stammered. "You know..."

"Are you off the stuff?" Rosa dryly asked after letting out a deep, cleansing sigh.

Susy was shocked. She did not expect to be asked anything like that, especially from somebody who was, for all her life, mostly avoiding direct conflict. However, she knew that her answer would be satisfying to all parties involved.

"I've been clean for three years." Susy truthfully spoke. Gertrude nodded her head towards Rosa to confirm that she was indeed telling the truth. Susy mustered a wavering sigh of relief.

Rosa dropped her uptight expression upon hearing her daughter's testimony. To her credit, she held it for quite a while. Her face slowly scrunched into an unpleasant mess as tears poured down her face. A childish squeal emanated from her mouth as she attempted to hide her emotions. She flung herself over to her daughter for a tight embrace, certainly one for the record books. They both broke down and cried harder than any of them had cried in their entire lives. Finally, for the first time in years, Rosa felt a

true emboldened emotion. The strength of her emotions made her feel alive, and thankful for the blood pumping throughout her body. It didn't matter that her husband was dying, all she cared about in that instance was for her family to pull itself back together. The embrace loosened and turned into a gentle sway. Susy's hyperventilated sniffles captured the sweet aroma of her mother's perfume: A faded-out hint of lavender and incense. A pleasant smell to everyone around, but most particularly a nostalgic smell reminiscent of simpler times long gone.

They never wanted the moment to end, but Rosa was the first to fully loosen her embrace. She held her daughter out at arm-length and gazed upon her face. Her beauty was blinding, even with the lack of makeup and crusted tear stains. It reminded her of her youth. She remembered how all the boys in school tried to get with her. She remembered how much of a hard nut she was to crack. And, upon glancing at her husband's frail and lifeless face, she remembered *exactly* who cracked her. A knot formed in her throat. Feelings of regret, sadness, and thankfulness queerly flooded her consciousness.

"We're going to make this right, but we're going to have to work hard on this together." Rosa mustered as her crying had ceased. "Money can't fix everything."

Every muscle within Susy's face relaxed upon hearing her mother's brief proposition. However, grief came as a side effect. She felt that she wasn't deserving of her mother's forgiveness, for her actions, though minor in the eyes of a reasonable observer, forever tainted Susy as an unforgiving sin. Nevertheless, she had children that needed to be taken care of. Any help was good help, no matter where it came from.

"I understand." That was all Susy could say within the moment. Rosa felt that she was free to love her daughter again, and

it felt all the more liberating to exercise this forgotten love right in front of the one who had bitterly denied it.

Susy had been lost within her mother's face, that was until her eyes detected an unusual movement from the corner of her field of view. Her head instantly shot over to the intrusive movement as her blood ran cold and her heart froze with panic. Jojo was standing right within the doorway, and nobody had noticed it until that very moment. Susy's stomach tied itself into a dreadful knot as her thoughts filled to the brim with negativity. Forget her mother's acceptance, forget her dying father, forget her raging younger brother: Return to a life of scrounging, begging, drugs, and being abused by everyone around her.

"Oh." Jojo groaned as he discovered that he was the center of attention within the room. "Didn't mean to interrupt anything."

His voice was calm and almost awkward. It was clear that he was critically thinking about something that he shouldn't be pondering. Mild anger still hung within his facial expression, but he held a somewhat calm demeanor and posture. It was also obvious that his times of sleep were stricken with restlessness.

"Susy and her kids are going to be moving in with us for a while." Rosa boldly stated. Her voice was stern and unargumentative. There was nothing that could be said to debunk her statement. It was a God-given fact.

Jojo's mouth crinkled into a strange frown of indifference. A sort of frown that was accompanied by a nod. The movement reminded his mother of a politician reluctantly agreeing with their opponent.

"Alright." Jojo sighed calmly. His emotions were much more under control within that moment. Susy feared that it was a temporary side-effect of his heavy fatigue. It hardly mattered

anyway, what mattered was what was going on within the moment itself. Gertrude felt it stirring within the hospital air; a question that was about to be asked. It made her sick to her stomach to think about it, but she knew it was going to be asked, nonetheless. She began to tear up as she gazed over at her son's chest.

Rising... Falling... Rising... Falling... Rising... Falling...

The anticipation spiked upon Susy glaring at the power outlet. A chord ran from the outlet to a complex machine that nobody within the room could even begin to comprehend. All they knew was this: That power outlet was what kept Van Carston alive. Anything obstructing the power would surely be deadly.

"Tomorrow's the day." Susy grimly stated in a heavy tone of remorse. A tear began to fall from her grandmother's eye. Gertrude desperately clung to hope, but as time ran out; it was clear that hope was betraying her. "What time of the day will we--"

"Six P.M." Gertrude interrupted. More and more tears fell as time dwindled right before her eyes. She picked the latest possible time for something like that to occur. She anticipated that at any second, Van would remove his mask and sit upright. She envisioned it within her head like a silent film.

He leans up to remove his mask. He looks around and stretches while moaning with relief. "Man" he would say. "I really needed that nap." And everyone would be happy and go out to get ice cream and sing karaoke in the living room.

Jojo sighed and left the room, the silence was chipping away at his rapidly dwindling sanity. He caught the security guard glaring at him with accusing eyes, waiting for him to slip up again. Each step away from the hospital room further bounced him towards a state of joyful contentment. He stopped swatting away at the unwanted thoughts because he realized that those thoughts were

what he truly felt. He felt that his father deserved this. He felt that it was no longer his fault that the accident transpired. He felt indifferent to the situation. And most importantly: He was ready to forget and forgive.

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Twenty-three years prior

The night was cold and dry. Van's nervous breath clung to the air in fleeting poofs ice crystals. His gut was wrenched with stress, the weight of his career, his family, his reputation settled heavily upon his shoulders. A stoic and broad young man could be seen within the reflection of many car mirrors within the parking lot. This reflection was his own: A young man with everything to lose.

He entered the Copperhead Saloon at around ten o'clock on a Friday night in 1982. The Copperhead Saloon wasn't anything niche to one particular group: It was just a load of normal people doing normal things and having a good time. No crazies, no queers, and no roughians. Just married men gathering around with a game of Billiards and a generic beer in hand, possibly spitting about the comings and goings of the day-to-day grind at the steel mill miles down an adjacent gravel road.

The hostess was absent from the front counter. A sign stood next to the stand; it was a curved and sprucy metallic sign that read 'PLEASE WAIT TO BE SEATED.'

Van looked around and spotted a colleague, Chad Bradford, sitting at the back by the fire exit. He was facing at the fire door, so he had no way of knowing whether or not Van had arrived. He looked around hopelessly for the hostess one last time but to no avail. All he could peek at were four to five hunks of eye candy desperately trying to keep up with the busy traffic of the night.

Finally, he swallowed the clump of saliva that built up within his throat and pushed his way towards Chad's table, overhearing monotone, fleeting, and mundane conversations as he passed through the condensed crowd of patrons gathered around the billiards table.

He finally made it within the corner where his colleague sat. Chad didn't look surprised; he knew that Van would arrive on time because he wasn't a loose cannon like the rest of his junky business partners. He simply looked up at Van and looked back down at some sort of complex schedule on a thick piece of cardstock. That was just the way Chad was: A forgetful man, but he never took a dare to write anything down about the type of business he was engaged in with Van. This meeting was simply just too important to conveniently forget about.

The spot where they sat was quite possibly the most secluded in the whole saloon. The table was right next to a wall that obstructed the view from the bar, and people sitting at booths would have a hard time glaring at them; the booths sat in a way that blinded Chad and Van from eavesdroppers: Not that anybody dared to eavesdrop; everybody seemed to be having a great time amongst themselves. Something loud and chaotic would have to happen for anybody to bat an eye in their general direction.

Van pulled out the soft, rubber-cushioned green chair in front of him and sat down. All he could see was the entrance and half of an empty billiards table. He exhaled and looked up at Chad's face.

He wasn't the prettiest thing to look at. Even though he was well into his twenties, the ghost of acne still haunted his forehead and temples. His long brown hair was also lightly greased up due to infrequent bathing. It wasn't all for a lack of trying, it was

obvious his hygiene was delayed due to a pressing matter of short notice.

Van opened his mouth to speak, but a hand moved up to shush him.

"Wait for the waitress to swing by." He demanded in a scruffy voice. "We need all the privacy we can get."

Upon closing his command, a waitress swiftly walked by the half-visible Billiards table. She sought to accommodate the new guests promptly.

Her belly was bursting from pregnancy, she looked like she could go into labor at any moment. The shirt that she wore was a deep black color comprised of a thin and frail fabric; her belly button made a visible protrusion upon her torso. Though her pregnancy was obvious, the rest of her body appeared thin and petite.

"Hi! My name is Dakota, and I will be taking care of y'all tonight." Her voice was sweet and fluid. Her masquerade was strong, she appeared to genuinely enjoy the service that she offered. Van thought about how odd her name was, *Dakota*: *That's quite an unusual name for a young woman.* "What can I get you, gentlemen, to drink?"

"Yeah." Chad began in his trademark scruffy voice. The only attention he gave the waitress was verbal. He was stuck staring at his twiddling thumbs for the time being. "I'll take a whiskey and Coke."

"Single or double?" she asked while fixating her anticipating glare.

"Make it a double, please." Chad responded while using his thumb and index finger to gently wipe at his closed eyes. He was annoyed by the waitress's presence.

"And you, sir?" The waitress inquired, her glistening green eyes idling to Van's command. "What can I get for you tonight?"

"I'll just take a Corona and lime, please." Van politely asked.

"Alright." Dakota noddingly concluded as her body turned away from the two men. "I'll be right back with the drinks."

She walked away from the table whilst producing a hairbow from her apron. She quickly wrapped her flopping straight blonde hair into a ponytail as she maneuvered throughout the saloon floor. Van couldn't pry himself from staring at her as she strode towards the bar. Her put-up blonde hair bounced up and down as some men from other parts of the saloon gazed at her firm and swaying bottom. Though she was pregnant, she still gathered looks from as far as the eye could see. Even Van, for a split moment, indulged in the straight man's primal urge.

Not Chad, he hadn't even caught the slightest glance at their server. This only made Van more nervous, *how seriously could Chad be taking this situation?* He continued to twiddle his fingers around the flimsy black paper coaster that sat to his right. Van looked down upon his side of the round table and noticed the same coaster. He thought it was strange, Dakota must have placed it while both of them were paying no attention.

Suddenly, a chill struck the back of Van's neck like a rusted dagger left to freeze in a blizzard. It briefly startled him, causing his head to turn and see the source of the chill. A cold and wild draft caused the fire door to sway ever so slightly open as a faint

whooshing sound could be heard. He exhaled his stress and inhaled a bittersweet breath of relief.

After what seemed like an eternity; the waitress finally made herself visible. She gripped the small glass of brown liquid in her left hand and held the piss-yellow bottle within her right hand. Soon, she swayed over to the table and sat the drinks down perfectly upon the black paper coasters. Chad immediately reached for his drink and took a refreshing sip.

"Let me know if you guys need anything else." Dakota cheerily stated as she began to leave the table.

"Thank you." Van softly moaned. His thanks went unanswered by the fleeting waitress. It was a really busy night after all; little to no time could be wasted on such repetitive social formalities.

Chad nodded at Van and waited for the footfalls of Dakota to drown with the rest of the sound of the noisy saloon.

"So, I've got good news and I've got bad news." Chad groaned in his trademark scruff. "What do you want to take first?"

"I guess I'll take the good news first." Van nervously gulped as he squeezed his lime into his beer. He upped the bottle to take a drink.

"Your top guy is only being charged with possession and will be on probation for five years: Pretty lucky for a clean white boy if you ask me." Chad explained while gently sipping upon his concoction. "The cops found so little of the stuff on him that they thought he was using rather than selling. Luckily, he kept the big stuff in a safe at his buddy's house."

"Alright." Van responded, now more nervous than ever. He took an even larger sip. He was already three-fourths the way done with his beer. "What's the bad news?"

"He's out." Chad stated, cut and dry. "Me and Neil talked to him all we could, but he simply won't budge. He was our best holder, and our business is going to run much slower without him. *Too* slow I'm afraid."

Silence befell the two as Chad began to squint, the beads of sweat and thin layer of grease glistened atop the acne scars on his forehead.

"You're going to have to find a new guy that we can trust." Chad concluded. His drink was already half gone at this point.

Van clinched his hairy fists and silently ground his light-yellow teeth. His anxiety started to turn into anger as he tightly clenched his bottle.

"I." Van muttered. "I thought you called me here to say that we're done. You seriously want to keep pushing forward with this?"

"Well, yeah." Chad scoffed. He scratched his head while he fully indulged in his dumbfounded state. "Me and Neil are still in on this. We assumed that you would be too."

"Are you kidding me?" Van sarcastically asked, starting to raise his voice. Still, nobody paid any attention to the two. "Chad, we grabbed all we could get. It's best that we take all that we've got and just stop. We've got *plenty* to grow on and you just want to risk it all for more?"

"Van, you do realize that we have *investors* that we need to make whole, right?" Chad leaned in. His eyes lit up and widened,

ridding any sense of uninterest. "We're in too deep, and if we don't sell their stuff; we're as good as dead. We may be floating in cash at the moment, but we need to surpass a hefty profit for the suppliers if we even want to begin thinking about retiring early."

"We'll just give it back then, and they'll just find some other rich old kooks to sell their stuff." Van almost yelled. Still, nobody was looking at them.

"That's *not* the point Carston." Chad clenched his teeth while slinging his index finger at Van's buff shoulder. "We can make so much off of this order if you just find another guy that *we* can trust."

"I'm not doing it." Van quietly groaned through his clenched teeth. "Not now and not *ever*!"

All Chad could do was sit in his chair and display a 'stink face' while sipping away at his drink. He slammed his nearly empty glass upon the damp paper coaster and rested his folded hands upon his lightly stubbled chin.

"You will *not* quit on us." Chad softly yet sternly proclaimed. His eyes squinted past his thick glasses and into Van's empty eyes.

"Nope. I'm out." Van lightly smacked the surface of the exposed table. "You and Neil can get caught without me."

Big mistake. Chad's slow mind took this as a threat: So much as a squeal could land a lot of people in prison, especially considering the 'tough on crime' rhetoric of the decade.

"I heard you and Rosa thought of the name Susy for your unborn child." Chad delicately leaned in for another sip of his

drink, finally finishing it off. "Would be a terrible shame if the wife miscarried your precious daughter."

Van's eyebrows and forehead began to viciously twitch. His heart skipped a beat. His enraged emotional state fully homed in on the man that sat before him.

"Are you threatening me?" Van quietly barked out towards Chad. A long pause began immediately.

"Yeah." Chad boldly boasted without flinching. "Maybe I am."

Van immediately chuckled as he took the last sip of his beer. Once the liquid disappeared into his gut; he let out a refreshing sigh. He began to bite down on his lower lip as his left index finger began to tap down on the table at a rapid pace. He finally snapped once Chad flashed him the slightest sign of a manipulative smirk.

He whacked the empty glass bottle across Chad's face, shattering it immediately. Saliva and blood flung from his mouth and onto the wall as the explosion of glass began making small incisions upon his face. The strike essentially turned the empty bottle of booze into a deadly weapon. Within this moment of blind rage, Van flipped the bottle and began moving his arm back the way it came. It finally stopped upon digging deep into Chad Bradford's throat. At this moment, spatters of blood decorated the walls, carpeted floor, and table. Chad began to slowly reach for his throat as his eyes panicked within their sockets. He was morbidly frightened at what just transpired, but this wound was too incapacitating to take retaliative action.

Van immediately flung up from his chair and began to turn and leave through the fire door. He immediately bumped into somebody who had been standing behind him. He swiftly turned to

find a middle-aged black man in dirty, ragged clothes with holes and tears riddled about. The unwelcome interloper had no concern of the man that had just bumped into him; his crusty gaze was fixated on the dying man that had just collapsed on the floor. Van instinctively shoved his way past the bumbling man and quickly escaped the building through the unsupervised fire door.

The black man quickly kneeled next to Chad and began to grab his hands. His hands quivered and shook in the heat of the intense pain. Matts of blood quickly painted the hands of the seemingly Good Samaritan.

"Oh mister, this really doesn't look good!" The man exclaimed in a tone of panicky dread. He felt his hands up and down his torso, attempting what little he could do to offer some kind of assistance or alleviation.

"H-help... me..." Chad demandingly gurgled in a mouthful of his retreating blood. His teeth began to glow with the crimson color of the blood as the man instinctively reached for the bottle.

He quickly unsheathed the bottle out from Chad's throat. This proved to be a devastating mistake; blood exploded from his neck as a visible puddle began to soak deep into the thin carpet covering the floor of the saloon. People flooded out from the building as a few brave and toned men began to make their way towards the man with the bloody broken beer bottle in hand. After a few fleeting groans; Chad quickly lost consciousness and died from his blood loss.

The man was tackled on the spot by a guy sporting a masculine and bushy beard. He proceeded to lay the man on his stomach and lock his arms into a submissive position: His muscular arms insured that the entrapped black man would not escape the

misdirected apprehension. Another man jumped behind the bar and called the Greenfield Police Department.

The man was too doped up to say anything, let alone remember the events that had just transpired, even as they transpired right before his very eyes. All he could do was remain limp and subordinate as his stubbled face soaked in the warm blood of a dead man, like a dog having his nose stuffed in a puddle of his urine by the will of an unrelenting owner. He was unfortunate enough to catch a drop of the foul, metallic taste upon his palette.

Van quickly returned home that night, frantically moving through his front door, and taking on the appearance of a disheveled and mentally disturbed man. He nervously closed the door behind him and began to pace about his large living room with both of his hands running through the forest of black hair atop his head.

Back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Oh, dear God. Did anyone see me? Did Dakota remember my face? What about the other patrons? If I was seen, did they see my truck? What about my plates? The beer on my tab, there's no way that will be overlooked!

Van's troubled mind raced at lightspeed. His breathing became heavier and louder as he frantically bounced back and forth about the large, yet evermore claustrophobic living room. His heart slowed, then raced, slowed, then raced: It was an extremity of stress that Van was utterly alien to.

What if the cops find evidence of our business on his body? What about in his vehicle? What if the feds get involved? Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! What about... What about... Neil... What the hell do I even say to him? GAHH!

Like a gun firing into his chest, he immediately collapsed onto his side, but not before bumping his head on the very edge of the coffee table that sat out within the center of the room. The thin carpeting covering solid concrete did little to pad the sudden descent, yet its embrace was nowhere near as punishing. His heart vigorously palpitated as it banged like a large war drum in his ears. His vision suddenly became blurry and wavy as the paint on the walls appeared to move in a strange bulging pattern. All four of his limbs with the addition of his face felt entirely numb as if they were suddenly stripped away from his body. His breathing pattern became diverse and unpredictable, rapidly switching between entirely stopping to outpacing a fully revved car engine. His ears exploded in a loud ringing sound as if two military-grade sirens were blaring on each side of his head. Finally, he became nauseous and light-headed, he was both lethargic and in a state of maximum panic.

After a full five minutes of trying to cling on to his dwindling consciousness, he rolled from laying on his side to lying flat on his back. The ceiling viciously spun and contorted into strange and unfamiliar shapes and patterns. Brightly colored blotches littered his vision as his field of view fluctuated with every monumental thud of his struggling heart.

Slowly but surely, he began to regain control of his body once more. His tinnitus faded, his heart palpitations subsided, his vision restored, and his breathing calmed. With every moment that his senses were restored, more and more tears leaked from the corners of his eyes. Soon enough, his eyes were dressed in tears as his hands began to delicately shake in terror. Though he did not

weep or sob, the waterworks were running their course. It was the first time Van had cried ever since the day that Rosa agreed to become his wife.

Oh, man. My wife, my daughter... I can't allow them to live a life without my support. I... Can't...

Van began to feel lightheadedness sweep over him once more as his consciousness delicately treaded the margins of reality. His eyes squinted closed, as the last remaining blotches of tears he would cry that night escaped from the closing of his eyelids. Soon enough, Van found himself unconscious; anchored to the floor. His chest slowly rose and fell as regular intakes of air finally resumed once more. His clenched fists unraveled into statuettes of fingers that slowly pointed up towards the ceiling. Warm air began to flood the living room as the house's automatic centralized heating system kicked on to protect the inhabitants from the unforgiving bight of winter that skulked just beyond the protective walls of the house.

Van was violently shaken awake about three hours later. The sound that shook him awake was the blaring ring of the telephone within the adjacent room. Not wanting to have the phone wake his wave, Van begrudgingly stood up much to the dismay of his head pounding in excruciating pain. He began to limp and waddle towards the telephone as his feet struggled to lift properly, causing his feet to drag across the thin carpet. He reached through the breakfast bar and picked up the telephone from the living room. He placed the phone on his ear and briskly cleared his throat to greet the unwanted caller.

"Hello?" Van drearily moaned. It was obvious that his throat lacked the lubrication of natural fluids.

"What happened Carston?" A grating voice beckoned from the other side of the wire. The accompanying exhale of cigarette smoke from the other side was so obvious that Van could almost smell the burning tobacco.

"Neil I..." Van started in a much more responsive tone as his heart skipped a beat. He could feel his veins pulsate with ample amounts of adrenaline. "I'm out. I don't know what more I could tell you."

Neil briefly paused before ending the call. Frightened, Van followed suit by resting the phone back upon its rotary pedestal. He firmly laid both of his shaking hands upon the chill surface of marble in front of him. He let out a drawn-out sigh that did well in somewhat calming his shot nerves.

"Who was that?" A feminine voice from behind yawned in fatigue.

Van quickly turned around to face the figure that posed the question. Relief poured into his conscience once he discovered that the figure standing before him was only his pregnant wife. Her fuzzy white robe lightly hung open, revealing her round pregnant belly, large cotton underwear, and a relaxed-fitting night bra. Her hair was messy and displaced from bed rest. Her dreary and squinting eyes inquired for an answer.

"Oh, hey darling." Van soothingly responded, utilizing every ounce of his sanity to keep his anxiety in check and his lies on cue. "I think it was a wrong number, they hung up pretty fast."

Remember, no unnecessary details. Nothing unbelievable. Stick to your guns.

"Oh." Rosa responded as she moved in to embrace her husband. She peered at a clock on the wall that was illuminated by

the porch light. "What are you doing up so late? It's 2:30 in the morning."

"I came back from an informal meeting with some associates about an hour or two ago." Van started, doing an impressive job at keeping his voice calm and steady "Wanted to watch some TV, but I guess I fell asleep on the couch before I could even reach for the remote."

Rosa ran her youthful and feminine fingers through her husband's hair during their loving embrace. She buried her yawning face within the confines of his welcoming shoulder.

"Come to bed hon. You must be exhausted from today." Rosa's grip tightened. "I want my big cuddle bear."

Van grinned: A reprieve for his racing mind was just what he needed. All that was left to do now was play the part of innocence until his wife would eventually fall asleep.

"Go ahead honey doll. I'm going to pour some water real fast." Van calmly proposed as he slowly backed away from the warm embrace.

"Okay." Rosa yawned. "Hurry up though: I want us both rested for the Halloween party tomorrow."

"You got it, my love." Van snapped back as he pulled a drinking glass from the cupboards in the kitchen.

He ran the glass under the faucet of the kitchen sink and watched as the cold water effortlessly filled the shape of the container. Almost instantaneously, he hoisted the glass above his head and swiftly emptied to contents down his throat. Laying the now emptied glass down upon the countertop, he began to recollect on what happened at the bar.

Who was that guy that came in before I left? He looked like a homeless bum. He also looked pretty unaware of his surroundings. Maybe he was blitzed out of his mind on some kind of drug? Or maybe mind-numbingly drunk. Yeah, I think I've seen him around before, he's homeless. He's black too: Many boys at the department would put a black man away for a Scooby snack: Hell, most would do it for less. Maybe the patrons tackled him, and the police came to the most seemingly simple conclusion without giving it too much thought. Maybe the stars aligned perfectly for me.

Van clinched his fists and backed away from the kitchen sink as he began to make his way towards the bedroom. He shook his head and thought about how stupid his move was. He never wanted to kill anybody in cold blood, but something about threatening his unborn daughter just *got to me*.

He turned the corner in the living room facing the hallway. He pushed his feet forward. Justification coursed through his mind. How could someone possibly justify murder? He pondered as he reached the dark recesses of the hallway. In a way, he shoved the thought out of the way because, in his mind, *I did what was necessary.*

What would this entail? Sure, he felt a semblance of guilt, but a more overwhelming emotion was anxiety. His mind flooded with doubts. All it will take is one unconsidered detail for the police to stick their nose too deeply in before they *figure me out*.

Van immediately stopped at the gaping door of the master bedroom at the end of the hallway. He peered in at his wife who already appeared to have fallen asleep. He rested both arms on the ends of the open-door frame as one final question plagued his mind.

What's Neil's next move on this?

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Chapter 4

Nobody walked in after Jojo: He slowly walked over to the folding chair at the right side of his father, a chair that was previously occupied by Gertrude the previous day. Unsurprisingly, no warmth carried over from his grandmother. The chair was just as cold as the day it was delivered to the Greenfield Baptist Hospital: Not even a lingering ghost of the previous occupancy remained.

All Jojo could do was sit and stare at his father. The hope of having him move a single inch from his last known position was gone. It didn't matter anyway: He was in a strange state of mind where he *thought* he was through mourning his father, yet he was still bottled to the brim with grieving emotions.

His hands rested upon his lower thighs, the fingers on his right hands were twiddling with the tiny holes on his vintage jeans. He used his stubby fingers to widen the holes, it was all he could do to cope with his masked emotions, for his fingernails were already chewed down to their bloody nubs. The previous night was different: He rested for about ten hours, but he still felt more tired than he ever had. This feeling of fatigue frustrated him, but he was too tired to show signs of his anger.

"I've been doing some thinking about what Mr. Bradford had offered me." He spoke to himself. He knew that his father couldn't hear him speaking, but it was strangely satisfying to speak the words in front of him, nonetheless.

"And I've finally concluded... Something to set me free..." His voice rattled as he began to choke up. His throat was pierced in dehydration. "I'm taking the deal."

He half expected his father to shoot upright and smack him in the face within that instant: To send off a swift and disapproving slap before slipping back into his brain-dead state. Realistically, nothing happened.

"And as much as I know you *loathe* that man: I will still surrender your legacy if it means that I'll finally be broken from your shackles." Jojo's eyes danced and paced around the floor in front of him. He found it pointless to look in his father's direction. "The money I'll make from your legacy. Think of what I could do with it. I could go to my dream school. I could become whoever I wanted to be. I could run *my own* business."

He glanced up at the television hanging off the wall. The local news was broadcasting a story on two happy little girls selling cookies to raise funds for some sort of Girl Scouts trip. He puckered his lips and once again found his train of thought.

"And you refused to help me out with paying for my education; forcing me to take student loans and pay them off myself." He openly pondered. "And yet, you bought me that birthday gift a few days ago. Too bad that ride's totaled, and too bad you're dead because of it."

Jojo looked up at the ceiling and blew raspberries out of boredom. His feet bounced up and down despite his tired state. He patted his hands on his scrawny thighs as he prepared to speak again.

"Too bad, sir." He groaned. "'Twas a rickety coffin of glass, metal, and polyester. Nuts and bolts too, can't forget those."

Soon enough his boredom overcame him as his eyes swayed shut ever so delicately. It took him about three minutes of

silence before falling asleep, but his delirious state coerced him into uttering a strange proclamation.

"I ain't... the man... that you want... me to... be..." He moaned before drifting to sleep within his upright position. The weight of his father's legacy finally slipped away from his shoulders. Nobody could deny him, he had his reasons and that's what drove him to make the decision. Nothing personal, but he didn't want to manage four diners by himself at that young of an age. Big whoop, Neil will take care of it all. He always does. Right?

Right?

Right...

Righ--

Jojo jerked up from his slumber as an unfamiliar nurse entered. Her youthful eyes darted at him as she realized that he found her sudden presence startling. She immediately straightened her lips, resulting in an awkward expression. She was briefed on the situation, but her duties forced her to come in. She had a sealed bag of clear fluid clutched in her right hand.

"Sorry." The nurse apologized in her friendliest voice, she swiftly moved over to the stand and replaced the fluid bag. "Didn't mean to startle you."

"Oh no, it's okay. I was getting a little lonely anyway." Jojo blushed. He found her extraordinarily beautiful. The nurse picked up on this, but she was in no way interested. "You go ahead, we need him to last until everyone gets to say goodbye."

"Just know that we offer free counseling to folks in your situation." She rehearsed while strapping on the new fluid bag and making sure that the IV was still secure within Van's arm.

"Yeah, I'm aware." Jojo groaned quietly. "I don't think it will be necessary though. We'll just rely on each other."

It was hardly therapy anyways: It was just a one-on-one conversation with a preacher from the church neighboring the hospital. Nothing like seeking psychological help from a closeted alcoholic dingbat. Pastor Davis was the last man to seek help and advice from.

"Well, there are forms at the reception desk if y'all change your minds." The nurse responded as she tried to swiftly gather her things and leave. She began having chills run up her spine as she made way for the sliding door.

"See you aro--" Jojo bantered before having the sliding door sever the conversation. "Hmm."

His head rocked back over to his father. His father's chest was still slowly rising and falling as the tube down his throat assisted his breathing. The thought kind of scared him. Never in his eighteen years alive has he seen a person die before, and he was going to have to witness his father's chest give its final fall in less than five hours. This new experience was horrifying. He just wanted time to pass by faster so he could get it over with, for he had completely abandoned his hopes of his father ever waking up.

"She was a solid ten." He silently moaned as he twiddled his fingers and looked at the baby blue tile floor. "She was on the tall side too. You were never into the taller ones, but you would agree with me that she has a nice ass."

An hour had passed before another visitor came by. Jojo remained awake to witness the entrance of his sister. Clasped within her hand was an old and dusty photo album. The album had a cushioned leather finish with the words 'VAN AND ROSA' knitted on the front. Jojo had recognized it instantly as his jaw clasped open in utter shock.

"No!" Jojo shouted enthusiastically. Susy mistook it for anger and flinched. "Where did you get that? I thought we lost that years ago!"

"Me and Grandma Gertrude cleaned up the garage after you went to bed." Susy explained as she held out the book for her brother to hold in his hands. "We found it next to the old fishing gear that he hasn't touched in the better part of a decade."

Jojo flipped the photo album open as Susy took a seat beside him. He didn't mind; he knew that it was best to at least try to get along with his sibling. He knew that it would take some time, but this was a crucial first step on the long road of healing and forgiveness.

The first photo within the album was labeled 'PROM 1974'. The polaroid photograph was of Van and Rosa standing next to each other. Rosa donned a flashy blue dress that was ripped straight from the 1920s. Her pearly white teeth brightened the picture significantly as her smooth and straight brown hair was slung past her right shoulder. Van was quite an eyesore. His mullet, Lennon-style glasses, and slight acne were all the more visible within the grainy photograph. His tuxedo was sharp though, even in adolescents he always knew how to dress nice. His awkward smile perfectly showcased his anxiety on that night. They were both seventeen years old in the photograph.

"Daddy looked so rough." Susy stated. Her eyes darted back and forth between the photograph and Jojo.

"Guess nothing much has changed." Jojo groaned nonchalantly. He immediately regretted the morbid joke, but he was met with surprise upon hearing his sister laugh. She giggled vibrantly at the joke. Naturally, he joined her in laughter as he turned the page over. They would have seen the wedding photo, but it was stuck to the page that contained the prom photo. The both of them were unaware of the page that Jojo had just unknowingly skipped.

The page that they turned to next contained another polaroid photograph. This one read 'HALLOWEEN PARTY 1982'. The photo was of Rosa cheaply dressed up as a witch. She held in her right hand an old-fashioned straw broom with the straw itself buried in an ancient layer of hardened and crusted dirt. Van donned a lazy vampire costume whilst standing next to his wife. He appeared rather nervous and fatigued within the photograph, which seemed quite odd to both Jojo and Susy. However, they chalked up his apparent anxiety as a coincidence. He was nervous about the prom photograph after all.

Jojo quickly flung his finger upon the dusty photograph and onto his mother's pregnant belly. His eyes excitedly darted from the scrapbook to connect with his sister's deep brown eyes. He felt that, at the moment, all of his rage and bitterness towards his sister had finally melted away for good: Or at least for the rest of the day.

"That's you in there" Jojo excitedly pointed out. His eyes locked upon his mother's face. Nothing has changed. Nothing fundamental at least. She was still as beautiful as the very day she had transitioned from a playful little girl into a passionate adult woman.

Jojo's droning was broken by Susy's hand turning to the next page within the scrapbook. The next page contained a Polaroid photograph labeled 'THE CHILDREN 1991.' Within the photograph, Susy wore a pink spaghetti strap dress with a white bordure while Jojo wore a '*He-Man*' t-shirt with tiny blue jeans. Jojo, who was four years old in the picture, held a janky smile as his two bottom teeth bent crooked; longing to be replaced with the permanent bones embedded within the child's skull. Susy, who was nine years old in the picture, held up a 'peace' sign with her left hand while her right arm embraced her little brother's pose-less body.

"Heh, your head looks like a peanut in this one." Susy giggled.

"At least I didn't inherit that freakish five-head." Jojo swiftly responded in a sarcastic and witty tone. He wrapped his right arm around his head and sporadically thumped his sister's forehead.

"Ow!" Susy giggled in a voice of mild pain. She arched her elbow and slugged her brother on the arm with immense strength. Jojo pretended that the pain was non-existent, but he was actually in a fit of silent agony. He had forgotten just how hard his sister could punch. "You're such a dork!"

The two mentally reverted in time: A time without hostility: A time where their parents seemed to love each other: A time where *they* all loved each other. Their beady eyes darted across each mulchy and dusty page of the scrapbook. Time began to dreadfully fly past them as their minds tuned out the impending doom of their father with memories of an age that had long since passed. What was once a dreary sarcophagus for a brainless old man quickly turned into a room filled with warmth accompanied with happy memories and days that were viciously longed to be re-lived.

Rosa and Gertrude regretfully entered the hospital room. Instantly, an icy tone of dread was once again felt. Time was ticking away slowly, Van Carston's life could be measured in mere hours. Dr. Yates scurried into the room once both women had processed all aspects of their surroundings. It was obvious to the Carston family that The Doctor desperately wanted the traumatizing event to be done and over with. The lack of nefariousness within The Doctor's posture established a sense of understanding between him and the rest of the family. They knew what had to be done, but not everybody was dwelling with what little life force that Van has left.

"Are we all ready?" Dr. Yates nervously sighed, nearly stuttering on 'ready'. "You may say your final goodbyes. If you would like, I can leave the room."

"Thank you, doctor, we're fine with you right there. We'll only be a moment." Gertrude answered as she stared into the lifeless face of her son.

What followed was a long, awkward silence that deafened the room. Even Though it had been chiming the whole time throughout the Carstons' visitation, the life-support machine seemed to be audible once more. Nearly five minutes had painfully passed by as time drove on slower than the speed of a dead house. Dr. Yates, after minutes of anticipation, began to open his mouth and suggest that he would be the one to shut off the life-support machine. However, Jojo spoke up before The Doctor could make his suggestion.

"I'll do it." Jojo started without any initial objection. He slowly reached his hand out towards the plug within the wall outlet that was at pelvis height. It was when his hand rested upon the plug that somebody else spoke up.

"Wait." Susy nearly yelled. "We... We should do it all together."

She leaned in and wrapped her dominant hand around the plug that Jojo had currently been occupying. Soon, Gertrude and Rosa joined in. Though Jojo was the only one physically touching the plug, each one of them had equal control over the position of the plug.

"Is everybody ready?" Susy asked, looking at his brother in the face.

"I'm ready." Jojo answered in a tone dryer than all the deserts on Earth combined.

"Ready." Rosa answered with a throat pierced with sadness and grief. She tightened her grip.

Gertrude couldn't speak, she only nodded when all eyes were on her. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she felt that her son could wake up at any moment. It was her subconscious that overcame her passion on her overall willingness to pull the plug. Her grip was the tightest of all, extraordinary for a woman of her ripe age.

"Alright then." Susy began. "On the count of three; we all pull."

"One." Jojo's teeth clenched as his eyes sat shut. His eyebrows curved, wrinkling his face. He was ready to pull.

"Two." Tears glided down Rosa's face. Her cheeks burned a beet red. Despite the ocean of fluids leaking from her eyes, she had her breathing under control.

"Three." Gertrude reluctantly sputtered as tears rolled like glistening boulders down her face. Her grip remained tightened as her arm anticipated the pulling maneuver.

"*Go.*" Susy uttered. Suddenly, all of them ripped the plug from the outlet. The plug plummeted to the baby blue tile floor. The life support machine powered off instantly. There wasn't any kind of beeping or critical sound that indicated that the patient was no longer alive: The room just fell more silent than it had before.

Jojo instantly ran his hands through his hair as he began to pace away from his father and towards the different corners of the room. Rosa knelt and began to sob harder than she ever had throughout the whole ordeal. She then reached for the waste bin and anticipated to violently vomit. Susy could only stare at the plug resting on the floor. Her mind was empty and unaware of anything happening within her surroundings: She could only hone in on the silence of the room. Gertrude focused on her son's face as her vision was clouded by tears. Nothing had changed at all, the only difference was that his chest no longer moved. He became even more of a statue than previously. Gertrude's wrinkled fingers were clasped together as her vision proved to be unbroken from the lifeless face of her one and only child. She wanted to see some kind of movement, whether it be artificial or willing.

Amidst the chaos, Dr. Yates lifted his clipboard. He grabbed the pen from the metal clamp and began to write on the piece of paper. Before his stylus glided across the thin sheet of cellulose, he briefly glanced up at the clock upon the western end of the room.

Time of death. He wrote. *6:26 p.m. Friday. June 3rd, 2005.*

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The Drop of a Plug

Thirteen years prior

The sunset lit the sky on fire with a barrage of bright yellows and deep oranges. The clouds that lingered near the sun held a thick silver lining that was most apparent towards the lower section of the cloud itself. The light, while still shining bright and filling the sky with its trademark colors, was not at all painful to stare directly into. The grass gently swayed side to side within the gentle spring wind. It was the first day of that year that a jacket or coat was not required to be worn outside. Winter's cruel and unforgiving bite was finally tucked away for several months to come.

"Daddy we're all done eating." a younger Jojo Carston timidly informed his father. "Can we go swimming again?"

Van's bitter face stretched into a fatherly smile as he gazed into the face of his only son. His face held the smile as his focus alternated to his daughter, who stood waiting for his answer with her large brown eyes. Something about those eyes got Van every single time, no matter how much trouble Susy found herself in; he always let her off with a slap on the wrist if her gleaming eyes were even slightly in view.

"Ah alright, kiddos. Just come inside in thirty minutes or else those mosquitos will eat y'all up." Van gently commanded. He lifted his chilled beer to his lips as his focus drifted back to the magnificent view that was on display.

"Yay!" the children both screamed in unison. They took off and jumped headfirst into the cool water of the in-ground swimming pool that Van had installed several years prior. Van's gaze tore away from the sunset to catch a view of his son doing a front flip into the water. He smiled as his offspring giggled and splashed each other to their heart's content.

He looked over at his wife, who was sitting adjacent to him. She had a book in her right hand and a glass of pinot noir in her left hand. The light danced on her face in a brilliant ray of beauty, further complimenting her perfect complexion. She lifted her glass to take a sip of her wine before turning the page to her paperback romance novel. She felt her husband's gaze, warranting her gleaming eyes to gaze above her wireframe reading glasses.

"What's up?" Rosa asked her husband; she took another sip from her glass.

"Ah, nothing." Van began. "I just needed something more beautiful than the sunset to look at for a while."

Her cheeks tinged up in a bright pink color as her lips stretched out into a smile. She began to chuckle as her smirk ran wider and wider.

"Oh, stop that you!" Rosa giggled as her face blushed intensely. Van winked at her, causing her blush to puff into a deeper pink.

She placed her glass down upon the mosaic glass table they had on the back patio. She then used her free hand to crease one of the corners of her book as to not lose her page. She set the book down next to her wine glass before she stood up.

"Can you help me get these plates back into the kitchen?" Rosa asked upon realizing the empty plates left around the outdoor table. She started reaching for several plates while Van honed away from the sounds of his children laughing and playing in the cool, relaxing water of the swimming pool.

"Yeah." Van groaned in a voice of content. "Absolutely my love."

Rosa looked up once again and smiled at her husband as they both handled empty plates from the table. Van also stretched a smile upon viewing his wife's obvious cleavage. It was an odd occurrence for her to show off her body like that, but he didn't care: It was nice seeing an intimate part of her body every once in a while.

With plates in hand, they both walked through the sliding doors that lead from that back porch to the exquisite antique kitchen. They both dumped the dishes into the empty sink. Rosa left for the back porch to gather other loose dishes as Van walked down the hallway to the bathroom.

Susy's hair was still frizzled from the shower she had an hour prior. Though she appeared wet, her pajamas remained warm and dry as she jumped into her bright pink twin bed. Her father's arm lifted the blanket to her chin as Susy crinkled to it for soothing comfort.

"You need anything before you drift off to sleep sweetie?" Van asked in his gentle, masculine voice.

"No." Susy answered in a high-pitched fatigued voice.

"Alrighty then. I'll let you get some sleep ." Van nearly whispered as he parted his daughter's hair and landed a soft kiss on her forehead. He stood up from his crouched position and made for the exit of his daughter's bedroom.

"Actually" Susy drearily moaned, causing Van to, once again, take a knee right beside her bed. "Could you tell me a bedtime story? The story you used to tell about mommy when she was pregnant with me?"

"Hmm, let me think for a moment." Van pondered as he sarcastically rubbed his thumb and index finger across his chin. "I don't think I can remember what you're talking about honey."

"Daddy!" Susy laughed as her father chuckled with deep bass in his voice that nearly rumbled the walls.

"Okay, okay sweetheart." Van coped as he fixated his eyes on his daughter. "I think your old man's memory is finally coming back."

Susy's eyes darted to meet her father's. Her eyes widened as she endlessly anticipated her favorite bedtime story. Rather than relying on fictional stories about brave princes fighting off wicked dragons or noble princesses locked away atop spiraling towers, she always loved a good true story: Especially one that involved a family member that she was immediately familiar with.

"When your mother was pregnant with you, she would always eat the strangest things. There were loads of weird things she would eat, like potato chips with ice cream or pure hot sauce, but there was one thing that she ate that I could never understand: Toothpaste." Van monologued in his whimsical story-telling voice.

"*Toothpaste!*" Susy quietly exclaimed and giggled as to not wake her brother in the adjacent room. No matter how many times she's heard the tale, the toothpaste part of the story always got her to laugh.

"That's right, toothpaste. Sometimes she would eat it straight from the tube, sometimes she would eat it from her fingers, and sometimes she would even put it on other foods." Van continued.

"Like what?" Susy asked in childish wonder. She already knew the answer, but she always pretended to forget to further satiate the pleasure she got from having the same story told to her.

"Well." Van began in his whimsical story-telling voice. "One day grandma came to visit us. She didn't know that I was out in the back lighting the burn pile, and she didn't know that mommy was in the bathroom having a snack. So, grandma decided to go use the bathroom and come and look for us once she was done."

Susy's eyes widened even further as she anticipated what she considers to be the absolute crescendo of the story.

"Guess what she saw when she walked into the bathroom?" Van sarcastically asked.

"What did grandma see?" Susy shrilled; her young, gleaming eyes were desperate for an answer that she already knew.

"Well, your grandma walked in and saw your mother eating saltine crackers with toothpaste on them!" Van answered with a hint of sarcasm undetectable by the mind of a child.

"Ew! That's so nasty!" Susy groaned while quietly giggling in her blanket.

"Hey now little girl, that's not where the story ends." Van warned in a low, cautionary, and narrative-driven tone. Susy removed her fuzzy pink blanket from her face as her eyes once again focused on her father's eyes.

"When you turned from a baby to a little girl, you had to start doing things differently that we grown-ups have to do, remember?" Van asked with his gentle tone.

"Yeah, I remember. I had to clean up my messes, uses the toilet all by myself, and--"

"And brush your teeth." Van interrupted. "When we decided it was about time for you to brush your teeth, we went out and bought you a pretty toothbrush with a flashing light that timed how long you should be brushing. We also got you some watermelon-flavored toothpaste for kids. One day I went to check and see if you were brushing your teeth before bedtime, and guess what I caught you doing?"

"What was I doing daddy?" Susy asked.

"You were..." Van slowly began. He enjoyed telling this part of the story. To him, this was the true crescendo. "Eating the toothpaste!"

The two began to giggle after the story. At this point, Susy was more than satisfied. She was ready to take her good feelings into the world of dreams until the break of dawn. She finally slowed her giggling with a tiresome yawn.

"I wish you could tell me bedtime stories more often." Susy wished in an exhausted voice. She had a lifetime of fun that day, far out measuring the days that she had for the past few months.

"I know honey. Daddy works really hard to keep a roof over our heads." Van explained in a much more serious tone. He moved his hand to stroke through his daughter's soft, wet hair. "But things are looking different for daddy's business. I've got a lot more people working for me now, and it's looking like they're ready to do some more work. I promise that I'll be able to stay at home more often so I can spend time with you and your little brother."

"Pinky swear?" Susy quietly asked, raising her pinky finger from the tight and warm confines of her blanket.

"Pinky swear." Van answered as he wrapped his large pinky finger around his daughter's. He slowly motioned both of their hands up and down to signify that the deal was sealed. He was genuine in his expression in spending more time with his daughter: He wanted nothing more than to maintain his promise.

Van pulled himself closer and laid a gentle kiss on his daughter's forehead as she further clung to the fuzzy blanket around her small and scrawny body. Her father cracked a loving grin and stood up from the side of her twin bed for the final time that night. He began to make his way towards the door.

"I love you boog." Van routinely stated while flicking off the light switch, further blanketing the room in comforting darkness. The small nightlight at the other end of the room offered a dim and cozy pale-yellow haze.

"I love you too daddy." Susy sleepily yawned. "Happy birthday."

Van smiled as he gently pushed the door shut. He turned around and made his way to the kitchen. Closer and closer to the kitchen, he could hear his wife running water as dishes silently clanked. He entered the kitchen as his wife instinctively dropped plates into the drain pan. She turned around to notice her skulking husband as he walked closer to her.

"Hey." she began while pulling the plug of the drain. "I just finished."

"You know I could've helped you." He proposed in hindsight while standing next to her.

"I know you could've, but it's your first day off in a while." She answered as her arms crossed on her thin silk robe. "It's the least I could do for you."

"Well, I greatly appreciate it." He began. "Did you have fun today?"

"Absolutely. Any day that you enjoy yourself *and* our children enjoy themselves is a rare commodity. This is the best day that I've had in a *very* long time." she gushed in a smile revealing her perfectly white teeth.

"Well, if you're happy; I'm happy." he declared. "I'm glad that we all had a good time."

Rosa then measured herself up to her husband's face and landed a sharp kiss on the lips. After placing some remaining silverware into the drain pan, she faced her husband once more.

"You know, the night is still young." She pointed out in a seductive voice.

Her thin silk robe slowly opened to reveal that she had been wearing nothing but a skimpy bra and thong the entire time she was doing the dishes. Her half-naked body was mesmerizing to Van. His working life deprived him of his innermost desires for a long period, so it was almost shocking to see such an event transpire right before his eyes.

"It's been a while since we've had sex, so I figured I'd put something nice on for you on your special day." She smiled. "Like what you see?"

"Oh yes. Van likes this very much!" He exclaimed, warranting a sensual giggle from Rosa.

They embraced once more, kissing as his burly hands ran up and down her smooth, petite body. As the kiss moved to her neck, she reached her hand down his pants.

"Alright, birthday boy." She moaned as warmth embraced her neck. "Let's take this to the bedroom."

At that moment, Van hoisted Rosa up and began carrying her. She giggled down the hallway as her husband carried her into the master bedroom. He laid her down softly on the bed as she began to caress her own body. He walked away from the bed to shut and lock the door. The bedroom light flicked off as feminine moans quietly sulked from the walls.

THE END

Jane C. Lovelle

Hi! My name is Jane C. Lovelle and I am an aspiring writer/author born and raised in the rural regions of North-Eastern Arkansas and Western Tennessee. I'm glad that you've made it to the end, and I hope that it was a good read for you. If you'd like to connect with me and give me some feedback, please consider finding me on the platforms below.

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